CRIMSON KINGDOM: BOOK ONE



HER CRIMSON FATE

AUBREY WINTERS

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BY AUBREY WINTERS

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BOOK ONE

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HER CRIMSON FATE

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CHAPTER

ONE

The bones of my fist crack against the bones of her face, but what I hear is the sound of coins.

Coins I will earn tonight—if I win.

Coins that won't go into my pocket.

She grunts, dark eyes lighting with anger as she spits. The blood lands between my feet, and the crowd jeers.

For me, or for her?

It doesn't matter.

She shakes her head, tied brown hair flicking specks of blood as she regains her footing on the worn floor of The Cage. Her hands curl into loose fists in front of her face. I don't see her fingernails, but I know they're caked with crimson, because I can feel it running down the side of my face. The woman is smart; her nails aren't sharpened, so she's well within the rules of The Cage, but she'd purposely cut them so they're jagged. So they'd hurt.

I'm breathing hard, but she's breathing harder. Those nails have torn the skin on my arms to shreds, and fire spreads from my face down to my neck. But I know better than to show any weakness in the fighting ring.

I roll my shoulders and bounce lightly on the balls of my feet, wiping my face with my forearm as I give a smile that's mostly just a baring of my teeth, bittersweet with glee when the determination in her eyes dampens.

She's new at this, and unfortunately for her, I know how to frighten the new ones.

With a wicked grin and blood smeared all over, I tilt my head and widen my eyes, knowing exactly how I must look.

The crowd jeers again. They've been doing that more often, but it's not my problem; this isn't my ring, and this isn't my business. My only concern is to win.

I block it all out. Whether they're cheering me on or yelling at her to do something, none of it matters to me.

The woman—Saryn or something—collects herself quickly. She takes a deep breath and shakes her head, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

I don't give her the chance to decide her next move; I make the choice for her.

It's the only choice I get to make these days—someone else's. Like how someone else makes mine for me.

She ducks, but her bare feet slip in her own blood pooled on The Cage's uneven floor. Mine is mixed in as well, but not quite as much, despite the best efforts of those nails of hers.

Her eyes widen with fear as she yelps, because she knows.

She knows.

Tightening my core, I leap for her and shift my weight at the last moment, slamming my elbow into her jaw—where I know it already hurts from when she'd taken a heel to the face.

She goes down.

The crowd goes wild.

I rise.

Taking long breaths that don't seem to fill my lungs fast enough, I fight to keep my composure. Fight to keep from shivering as I glance at the hungry faces all around me.

All types of shifters watch fights inside the ring from their seats outside The Cage. Bears, birds, snakes, rodents. Some are shocked. Some are disgusted. Others are outright gleeful. But all are entertained.

Shifters out there. Shiftless in here. It's cheap entertainment for them. *We're* cheap entertainment for them.

Whether we fight each other for their amusement or work for them to make their lives easier, it's the way of Selerune. The way of the world.

The more I think about it, the more I want to kick something.

Or someone.

But I don't, because the woman in front of me is already down, and people like us, the shiftless, we don't need to be kicking each other when

we’re down. Not when the shifters do so for us.

And it’s not as if I can kick a shifter. Not if I want to stay out of trouble.

So I take a shuddering breath and plaster a smile on my face—one I know is more false happiness than teeth—and let the judge walk up to me and lift my arm, deliberately avoiding the blood-soaked wrap on my hand. He doesn’t even look at Saryn lying on the ground.

“Once again, Bloody Scarlet is our winner!” The crowd cheers, jeers, and does everything in between, but the roaring in my head mutes it all. I lick my lips, wincing at the metallic taste, and swallow hard as I tilt my head back in a futile effort to stem the blood flowing from my nose. It doesn’t help, but at least it seems to increase the audience’s excitement. Spencer will be pleased about that.

I hate the name they’ve given me for The Cage. Bloody Scarlet. It reminds me of everything I do—everything I have to do.

I wince again, but this time it’s because some of my blood lands on Saryn’s shirt. She groans, though I know it’s impossible for her to have felt the droplets.

I hope she has a good healer.

Once the judge has deemed we’ve received enough attention, he drops my hand and opens the door of the chain-link fence that comprises The Cage, leading me out. I resist giving the other woman one last look; I doubt she would see it as anything other than goading, and someone will come for her before the next fight.

Some of the more exuberant shifters try to get in my way as I follow the judge off the stairs leading to The Cage, shouting challenges of all sorts. The walk to the door that will take us into the backrooms of the building has never seemed longer.

When I first started fighting for Spencer, the crowd would boo as I walked into the ring. I didn’t blame them; I was small, short, and scrawny. How could they have expected that I would last long enough to entertain them? They were right, of course. I was knocked out immediately.

But I came back.

I had no choice but to come back.

And over time, I got better at ducking and dodging. Then, I got better at hitting back.

When I won my first fight, the crowd exploded with excitement. Wilder than I’d ever hear again in the next four years I’d spend in this skies-cursed

hole.

I’m still small. Still short. Still scrawny—but a little less so.

It makes for good entertainment when the smaller, shorter, scrawnier twenty-four-year-old takes down opponents almost twice her size.

Recently, however, the crowd has been more unruly than usual. Less entertained. More derisive.

Gerard—one of the nicer guards at Spencer’s—meets me and the judge halfway to the door and bodies the more brazen idiots away. I grunt my thanks. He grunts his acknowledgement.

He pushes the door open, and I blink against the bright light pouring through. No one is stupid enough to get between me and the backrooms, not when Gerard is big even for a bear shifter. The doors finally close behind us, and it feels as if a weight has been lifted off my chest.

The judge doesn’t even try to hide his grimace; the ferret shifter wipes his hand on his pants immediately, mumbling something about the violence. Without a word to me, he turns from the grimy hall and goes down another one. I would have made a rude gesture at his retreating back, but I’m bone-tired. Instead, I follow Gerard despite knowing my way.

The guard pauses in front of a row of short metal cabinets. With a loosely held fist, he lightly smacks one at just the right spot so the door pops open. He reaches in and pulls out a cloth, which he wraps around some ice before handing both to me. It’s rough but cool against my tender face, and I nearly sigh at the relief, closing my eyes from the harsh light of the cheap lanterns against the peeling, yellow paint as I try to drown out the excited sounds of the start of tonight’s next fight.

Gerard grunts, and I force my eyes open, wincing at both the pain in my rapidly swelling cheek and the blinding brightness.

I take the bandages from him, careful to avoid touching his hand as I do so, and hum my appreciation when I notice their jagged edges. He’d cut them for me.

I don’t disrespect him by saying anything more. We’re both here by choice, but it’s a choice made by necessity. He doesn’t want to be here any more than I do, and we’re friendly colleagues at best—though I do hope to work up the courage to become real friends one day.

Gerard shoulders the cabinet closed and starts walking again without checking if I’ve wrapped myself; he knows I won’t—not until I’m home alone. We’ve done this song and dance many times over the years.

Only when we get to the door I hate the most, does Gerard turn. Only then does he meet my eyes.

Big, even for a bear shifter, Gerard is built like a house and can hit like one, too. But he's also quiet and knows when to be gentle. Right now, the kindness in those soft blue eyes does not match the thick silhouette cast by the flickering lantern behind him. His gaze drops to my lips before lifting to meet mine once more. Hearing the unspoken command, I stop biting and wince, finally noticing the pain from the split on my bottom lip. Gerard lifts a brow.

I shake my head. He smirks.

For a moment, Gerard helped me forget, and I'm grateful.

He understands.

As he walks away, he mutters, "Use the bandages."

Then, I'm left facing the door of the person I'm forced to fight for.

"Nice work today, Bloody Scarlet." Spencer has a rolled cohua stick between his teeth, and despite being seated at his desk, he manages to look down at me while I'm standing. I wish he would just call me Scarlet. But this is his way of controlling me. Controlling people. Just one of many.

The same cheap lanterns lighting the halls also decorate his office, though it makes him look meaner in here. Also a bear shifter, Spencer is not as large or as physically intimidating as Gerard, but only a fool would look at the two and wonder who's truly in charge. The long, thin scars on Spencer's forearm ripple as he looks down at his desk and shuffles some papers, shifting them to the side along with another pile as he pulls back and opens a drawer. A thick tome lands heavily on the desk, and my breath catches in my throat.

I might have just won in the ring, but this room still feels like a cage I'll never escape. Just like its namesake.

Gerard's blue eyes are kind. The green ones winking up at me are not. They feel like a trap in the worst way possible. Like I know what's about to happen, yet I can't leave to stop it from coming true.

He tilts those vicious green eyes down toward the chair in front of me, breaking the spell. I clutch at the once-clean bandages—now soiled by the blood I've yet to wash off—and pull at the ends coming loose from the wraps still around my fingers and wrists. Spencer wants me to sit, but I know from experience that sitting will make this worse.

He doesn't look away.

I take a seat.

The sound of the book's cover hitting the table is almost as loud as the drumming in my ears, though I know it's just a trick of my mind. Because I know what's coming next.

As discreetly as I can, I inhale deep and long before holding my breath, looking at anything but Spencer and his book. The locked chests behind the hateful man, stacked high behind his cropped hair. The windowless walls that make this room feel more like a dungeon than an office. My bloodied hands resting in my lap, where bruises already pepper my bare thighs from the strength of Saryn's kicks.

It's a good thing tonight's fight was a fists challenge. She's skilled; had it been a swords one, I might not have been lucky enough to walk away with mere cuts and bruises.

Real blades aren't allowed in Spencer's Cage, but even though the blunted swords don't cut, they still hurt. Bones still break. And like Saryn's nails, there are ways around the rules. Anything to win.

Spencer mutters something under his breath, satisfied now that I've taken a seat like he wanted. He's a man used to getting what he wants; I'd learned quickly when I first started working for him. I had no other choice. Our adoptive parents had died a long time ago, leaving their debt to me, and when the last of my siblings left the year prior, I couldn't keep up with the payments on my own. Eventually, Spencer came to collect.

He'd wanted his money, but he was also looking for fodder—fresh meat—for The Cage. I was looking for ways to pay.

Four years later, I'm still fighting. Still paying. Still without hope of finishing that debt.

"Ah, here we are. Bloody Scarlet." He smirks.

I grit my teeth. It's the combination of the name with the devious grin that sends shivers down my spine. I hate that name. It twists something that is wholly mine into something grotesque and violent. It reminds me of everything that shaped me into what I am now. A weapon honed by the ring

and sharpened for survival. For the last four years, blood has followed everywhere I go.

“And how are we feeling about our debt today, Bloody Scarlet?” Spencer peers at me with mischievous eyes, as if every ounce of my discomfort only adds to his glee. He knows he controls us—his staff, his fighters—in this way, and it feeds his power, assuring him of his position. Though he hasn’t risen in the ranks of Selerune, in the small town of Grengrove, he towers over those who work for him. A master to the shiftless indebted to him.

I twist the bandages in my sore fingers. Maybe he can smell my fear, because his lips turn upward.

Instead of waiting for an answer, he drags a finger down the page as though having forgotten he’d already found my name. I swallow a rising shudder and wait as he plays the game once more.

“Bloody Scarlet’s debt has been, as of today, brought down to only three thousand golds, three-hundred-sixty-two silvers, fifty-eight bronze, and seventeen coppers.”

My jaw almost drops, and my hands loosen. I’m sure my nails have dug past my hand wraps and left crescent imprints in my palms.

“How—how is that possible?” The words escape my mouth in a croak. “How much did—how much did I win tonight?”

Spencer looks at me with false pity as he sucks on his teeth. The familiar sound usually makes me want to punch him in the face, but I can’t think past my haze of confusion. “Twelve bronze. Forty coppers.”

“T-twelve bronze marks?” I stutter. “But I—”

“She was a new one. You’ve been winning a lot. People expect it, so bets aren’t so high on you anymore.” He shrugs. “It’s just how it is.”

It’s just how it is.

His words echo in my mind as my fingers twitch, trying to do the impossible math. It’s too much. Too little. Overwhelmingly unbearable. In the early days, when no one expected I’d win, I earned almost triple what I’d won tonight. Now…

My breathing grows shallow. I force my hands to still, letting the sting of my nails digging into my palm ground me. He pulls a pen from its inkwell with one hand, the other sifting through sheaves of paper until he finds what he’s looking for. He slides the nib against the edge of the glass pot once, twice. Then he brings the pen to the scrap of paper.

“Ten bronze and forty coppers off…” Spencer mutters to himself while writing out the numbers. I watch his pen like a hawk—I couldn’t do the math in my head, but my mind is quick enough to catch it on the page.

“Wait,” I say. He freezes at my unexpected interruption. “Sorry,” I mutter quickly. “Can you make that twelve bronze marks? I can take just the forty coppers.”

He scoffs, but doesn’t question the paucity of the amount. Two extra bronze toward the debt can add up, and I still haven’t checked my traps yet. I can make forty coppers work if it will reduce my sentence.

“All right.” He starts the math again. “Twelve bronze from fifty-eight makes forty-six.” He looks up at me with a wide smile. “Do you know how much that leaves?”

The condescension makes my skin prickle with irritation, but I force a small smile because I know that’s what he wants. “Three thousand golds, three-hundred-sixty-two silvers, forty-six bronze, and seventeen coppers.”

He nods with that grin again. “Good work tonight, Bloody Scarlet.”

“Not good enough,” I mutter.

Spencer tilts his head, holding my gaze. “Your time will come.”

My skin prickles again, but this time it’s from anticipation. Because nothing good ever comes from accepting an offer from Spencer, and I can’t tell if this is a promise or a threat.

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CHAPTER

TWO

The evening air is cool on my raw skin, providing a modicum of relief against my still-hot and aching pains. Spencer has healers on his payroll, but he only pays them to be there—to be available. We have to pay for our actual healing, which means I couldn't afford to get healed all the way tonight. Spencer doesn't mind, nor will he interfere. Sometimes, he even uses it to his advantage, spurring more excitement into the next fight by claiming—sometimes exaggerating—our still-present injuries.

More entertainment means more money.

I rarely mind because it means I'll get more, too. But after seeing my poor earnings for the night, I almost regret using so much toward the debt.

The half-moon provides just enough lighting as I clumsily make my way through the shrubbery, avoiding where I know the thick roots trawl the forest floor. If the skies had chosen me to be a shifter, I would have used shifter magic to harness my animal's abilities to see better at night.

But I wasn't so lucky, so I have to stay out of the shadows as my bruised knee protests each step into the woods.

The clothes I retrieved from my locker at Spencer's Arena barely keep the chill out, but they're better than nothing, so I carefully make my way through the woods to avoid tearing them on wayward branches, especially as a gust of wind whips through the trees. Even though I adjust the shoulder strap of my bag, every part of my body aches, and there's no position that makes wearing the bag more comfortable. With a sigh, I focus on my footsteps and try to think about anything other than the lingering pain.

Sylfar is a continent of shifters, natural-born dragons, and the shiftless. Natural-born dragons keep to themselves out in The Wilds—the true

wilderness out east, not the uninhabited parts of the Selerune Kingdom—and they leave us alone as long as King Waylon leaves them alone. Shifters make up most of the people of Selerune, with their positions and social classes depending on their varying power and abilities. The shiftless, those of us who weren't chosen by the skies to have an animal form with whom to bond, have to make our own way in the world by whichever manner we can.

When my adoptive parents were still alive—and when my siblings were still around—things had been fine despite the debt collectors. Together, we were able to keep them at bay. Our parents were bird shifters who sold wares at the daily market, and none of us had been old enough to make the first shift yet, so the kids learned to hunt instead. Things got harder when our parents died, but it was still manageable for some time.

Eventually, I couldn't keep up with the payments from my hunting alone, and Spencer turned up at my door.

If I had been born a shifter, if I'd made my shift and bonded with my animal, I'd have been able to apply for jobs outside of Grengrove, like my siblings had.

A lump forms in my throat, but I wince as my foot lands on a particularly large rock, and I nearly twist my ankle.

It's always extra hard to avoid thinking about my siblings when I'm out here in the woods, where it's too quiet for my loud mind. Too silent to avoid the winds that whisper memories of my siblings into my ears.

I shiver.

My body already hurts. Why not let myself fully sink into the pain and drown in the memories, too?

I'm the first of Jonas and Janica's surviving four adoptive children. The others say there were children before us, but I've never asked what happened to them. Little-me hadn't understood the rumours, and with the crown's support for adopting orphaned children, our numbers only grew.

When we were young, it was me, Anica, Tess, and Ajax. The thought of our adoptive parents rarely stirs feelings aside from anger and frustration, but the thought of my siblings hurts my heart, even years later.

A snap pulls me from my thoughts, and everything in my body tenses. Despite my legs' protests, I make my feet light and take two steps toward a tree until I'm close enough to tuck myself behind it. I don't have my bow and arrows with me—I left them at home even knowing I'd be in the woods

tonight to check on my traps, because the one time I brought them to Spencer's, someone stole them right out of my cupboard, and it took far too long to buy another set—but I'm better with my daggers, anyway.

Again, I swallow a curse for my shiftless sight as I peer out from behind the thick trunk and squint against the shadows of the forest, a dagger clutched tightly in each hand. With my guard up, I don't feel most of the lingering pain, but everything suddenly seems like a threat. The darkness twists and turns into figures. Moving branches become the drawing of a bow. Each tall wildflower swaying in the gentle breeze is a predator crouching to pounce.

My heart hammers in my chest. It's dangerous to be out here alone, especially as a shiftless. Grengrove is a small town, and I'm far enough from the town's boundaries that I risk stumbling upon some of the more vicious hunters—both shifters and shiftless—who don't care whether their prey is human or natural-born animals.

I'm also risking stumbling upon something worse.

The Rebels.

A shudder crawls up my spine. Skies, I hope it's not the Rebels.

While I'm not unarmed or untrained, I'm also still injured. I could maybe take on another hunter if they're also shiftless, but I might as well return my chaos to the skies if I encounter a Rebel out here.

I force my breathing to lengthen and will the air to reach deep into my lungs and down toward my stomach. My breaths quiet along with the thundering in my ears as I keep still and wait for the threat of danger to pass.

It's only when I'm certain the sound was a mere creature meandering through the woods that I sheathe a dagger back into my boot, joints aching as the adrenaline ebbs from my veins. Still, I move the blade to my belt.

Just in case.

Unsettled, I make quicker work of my traps than usual, darting from one to another as soon as I'm done resetting it. Only a few were successful in catching something, and though Old Gary might give me the stink eye, it's enough.

Tightening the straps of my wax-lined bag, I nearly groan from the extra weight as I shift it onto my shoulders and grit my teeth for the long walk back. At least the clouds have cleared, allowing the moon to light my way.

My hands shake as I undo the knot of my bag. I avoid Old Gary's narrowed gaze, knowing he's eyeing its meagre size. With the amount of grunting I'd done while walking through his door, he'd likely expected it to be heavier. Had expected more.

The silence might have intimidated some people into asking about my bloodied and bruised knuckles—worse now than when I'd left Spencer's—but not Old Gary. Old Gary's chilly gaze, while nearly as cold as the coming winter, allows the quiet to weigh over us like a comforting blanket.

Until the drawstring slips from my stiff fingers. It seems that was the final straw for the butcher.

"Scarlet, you don't get paid by the minute, you know." His gruff voice sends my cheeks flushing with shame. I exhale hard; what do I have to be ashamed of?

A lot, I guess.

I try not to let it bother me; not my shiftless status nor my home nor the sizeable debt so kindly left to me by my dead adoptive parents. Not even the abandonment by my siblings.

Some days are harder than others.

"Sorry," I mumble. "Bit cold tonight."

It's fine. It's all fine.

I look up at him so he sees the sincerity in my eyes. The ancient leopard shifter sighs, shuffling his weight from one foot to the other as his eyes rove the bruises on my face and the cut on my brow that I could barely afford to get closed just enough so it would stop bleeding.

Grengrove's butcher has been old since Jonas and Janica adopted me when I was six. It's been eighteen years since, and Old Gary still looks the same as the day I met him, with his grey hair, grey whiskers, and tough sneer. He might be a little frailer now, but he's no less scary. And no less respected.

"You want some snips?" he asks, lips curling around the gently smoking stick of rolled cohua bark between his teeth. Without waiting for my reply, he reaches below the counter, squinting in the dimming light of his shop. In all the years I've spent growing up in this town, I've never seen Old Gary without his signature roll of cohua. Whereas the sight of Spencer with the

cohua stick makes my stomach roll with anxiety, the butcher smoking his is a sight for sore eyes.

I know the bark is for his pain; I don't remember a time when he didn't walk without his limp, either. Judging by the way he moves these days, he'll soon be needing more—especially once winter hits both our town and his joints.

Maybe I can convince him to let me peel the bark from our local trees for him. Surely, even the nearest cohua grove must be too far for those knees to make the trek.

Old Gary emerges from behind his counter, wincing as he straightens. He waves a pair of clean snips with an air of impatience in a wrinkled but strong hand. Even though it's late and he's eager to get home, he also knows it was a fight night for me and doesn't press more on the matter.

"Thanks," I mutter, flexing my fingers to get some warmth back into them as I take the cutter, careful to avoid touching his hand. Both he and Gerard are friendly with me, but neither is truly my friend, so I doubt they would appreciate casual contact. I make quick work of the rope tying my bag together, ensuring the cut is clean so I can continue using it for a while yet—no use wasting perfectly good rope—and spread the edges of the wax-lined cloth so they fall open to reveal the goods. "No trap marks this time."

Old Gary nods as he studies the game laid out before him. The tough leopard shifter might not hunt anymore, but he is still a hunter through and through. The hard lines around his eyes soften, and for a moment, the invisible barrier between us lowers.

For just a moment, we're more than vendor and supplier.

More than seller and hunter.

More than acquaintances.

Maybe even something closer to friends.

Almost.

It's moments like these, when he recognizes the extra effort I put in, that his resolve weakens just a touch.

"In time for the harvest, eh?" He nods again, this time with more conviction. When he raises his gaze to mine, I steel my spine and keep my breathing even, because I know he's studying the marks still on my face. Still on most exposed parts of my skin.

I don't want his pity, but I do hate how much I warm at such nothing-words when my hands and feet are the ones in need of the heat of a real fire.

“Yes.” I don’t reach out to help him with the meat—I don’t even offer, though it looks like his limp is particularly bad tonight—because doing so would offend him. Despite desperately wanting to encroach into the territory of real friendship, I don’t want to push him away and dissolve what little I have endeared myself to him.

Plus, having given Spencer most of my earnings tonight, I literally cannot afford to offend Old Gary enough that it might cost me the extra coppers he might otherwise offer.

The proud butcher deftly knots the ends of the drawstring I cut, pulling the cloth sack closed. With a quiet but dignified huff of effort, he lifts the bounty and carefully makes his way to the cold room behind the counter. Pausing for a moment at the curtain, he shifts the bag at his shoulder and lifts one sinewy arm to brush it aside before readjusting the weight and disappearing from my view.

I let out the breath I’d held; I’d hate to see anything happen to him. Not only is Old Gary one of the few townsfolk who are kind to me, but sales to his shop also make up half my scarce income.

And the skies know I am sorely in need of both friend and coin.

As the muted sounds of the butcher setting to work fill the silence, I let myself look around his familiar store. There’s enough flickering light left that I can see the mostly empty shelves, which will be filled with ice blocks displaying my kills before the sun returns for the morning. Meat I can hunt but cannot afford to eat, just to pay off more of my debt to Spencer.

Bitterness ripples through my chest, and it only increases when I notice the wall on the left, where people post flyers for things such as available room and board, upcoming town events, and new vendors with new goods. They all surround one massive, bright poster in the middle bearing the royal insignia—a roaring, golden dragon—of Selerune’s king, declaring additional food and money for families of those who apply to become soldiers in his fight against the Rebels.

King Waylon doesn’t help his citizens unless there’s something in it for him and his crown. Even those of us who grew up without formal education know about the time when, about two centuries ago, a horrific drought hit the kingdom and wiped out a good portion of shifters. We’ve all heard the whispers of how, instead of helping his people, the king offered a monetary incentive to encourage having more children to replenish the population.

That had led to all sorts of issues, only one of which is the reason my siblings and I ended up with our adoptive parents, and the reason I'm alone now.

And the reason I'm in so much debt.

I'm sure few—if any—in town like seeing a giant poster of the king's emblem. It likely does little more than remind them of their own misfortunes. But no one would dare take it down for fear of bringing upon Grengrove the wrath of King Waylon.

Or worse.

The King's Three.

My stomach growls, reminding me there's nothing I can do about where I am now; I can't control my past and I can't control what happens to the kingdom, but I can control my future—though, even with that, there's only so much I can do.

The wooden aisles filling the middle of Old Gary's store have already been restocked with packaged dried goods. My stomach protests again as my mouth waters at the sight of the herbs hanging from the end of the shelf. Even without a breeze, I can smell its sweet fragrance.

When was the last time I had soup?

With Tess and Ajax, I think. Back when there were still three of us working, even without Anica, we made enough for the payments to keep Spencer's collectors at bay while still affording decent meals all year long.

Tess would have hated the sweetmallow that's currently making me salivate. She would have brushed her dark hair, almost as black as mine, from her pale face before crossing her arms and glaring at me.

Ajax, on the other hand, would have scoffed at our sister. Though he's the youngest of us all, he was also the most mature and least picky when it came to food.

That's why it hurt so much when even they left me behind.

I sigh before turning back to the counter, leaning my good hip—or rather, the less bad one—against it. On my own, I can't afford to think about soup, much less the herbs with which to spice it.

Old Gary shuffles back, pushing the curtain aside and taking his spot behind the counter where, I'm sure, his shoes must have worn indentations into the floorboards from all the years he's been here. Without the weight of the meat, he moves more swiftly.

One hand drops a length of thin rope and a neatly folded square onto the counter, the wax liner already washed and rinsed. I give him my thanks, grateful he took the task off my list of things to do before bed tonight.

Carefully, I tuck my deconstructed cloth sack into the pocket of my hip bag, eyes unable to stray from the butcher's withered fingers as they tug at the opening of what looks to be a heavy purse of coins.

He hunches over slightly, pouring a handful of marks—some dull, some glittering—into his palm before placing them on the counter and retying the purse, sliding it into the inner pocket of his thick vest.

The clink of the bronze and copper makes my heart race as my wide eyes study the number of the coins, counting twice just to be sure.

"Well? Are you going to grab it or what?" he asks gruffly, yanking his vest closed. The cohua stick bobs slightly between his teeth with each of his words.

"Are…Are you sure?" I almost swallow the words, because what if it really is a mistake? And now he'll realize how many extra marks he's dropped in error?

He grunts, jutting his chin toward the aisles behind me. "It's nearly final harvest. I saw you eyeing that sweetmallow."

A lump grows in my throat, and my eyes heat even as I sweep the coins into my own purse. The marks are still warm from his rough kindness.

"How much? For the mallow?" I hope he doesn't hear the emotion in my words, but if he saw the way I was looking at the herb, I'm sure he notices how much this means to me.

He makes a disgruntled noise and turns, dropping something on the counter before waving a hand in the air. "Just take it. It'll go nicely with the meat for a hearty stew. And everyone deserves a good stew before winter."

"I—what?" I look down and can't help but gasp at the parcel of meat on the counter, neatly wrapped in wax paper and tied with string. A hundred words fly through my mind; none make it past my throat.

"What are you waiting for?" he snaps, returning with a broom in hand. "You'd best get going if you're going to simmer that. And trust me, you'll want to simmer it for that flavour to come out."

"Uhm. Yes. Thank you." I clutch the package to my hammering heart.

"Go on, Scarlet. You need to rest for tomorrow night, and I need to lock up. Get the sweetmallow and get home before the Rebels get ya."

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CHAPTER

THREE

"You're joking." My voice is an unsteady croak as Spencer's words settle in my mind. "It's not—you're not asking me to do that."

Spencer's green eyes, bright with the glint of amusement that usually means trouble for the rest of us, shine in his dark office, almost as if he's purposely channeling his shifter powers just so he can look down at me even from his seat behind his desk.

His lips pull up, but he shrugs. "You're the one who wanted more money, didn't you?"

"Yes…" I trail off, debating my next words.

"So, this is the way to make more money." His smirk widens. That cheap light flickers as unsteadily as my heart. "You'll face Kait the Bait. She's got a great reputation for being on a win streak. Three towns in a row now, actually."

"And you think I can't beat her?" The confusion ripples through my entire body, and my skin prickles in the way that I know means something bad is about to happen. The pit in my stomach grows until I'm sure I will fall through the floor. "Or is it that you don't want me to beat her?"

Spencer leans forward, props his elbows on his desk, and steeples his fingers; the smugness emanating from him is so thick it's nearly tangible. "This is where it gets interesting, Bloody Scarlet." I resist a shudder at the way he says my horrible nickname. "Word on the streets is that people are still betting on *you*, despite her undefeated win streak. She might have won in three towns, but she's still new to the ring."

"…And I'm not," I say slowly.

He nods. “You’re not. And that’s why you’re still the favoured fighter tonight.”

I feel the blood drain from my face, my knees weakening with each of his words.

“Which is why, when you lose, you’ll make a lot of money.”

You mean you’ll *make a lot of money.* I bite my tongue to keep from angering him. “But what if I beat her?”

His expression turns icy. “You won’t, Scarlet.”

“You truly want me to lose on purpose?” I ask, shivering when Spencer’s smile returns, because the coldness is still evident in his eyes. “Won’t people…know?”

“You’re that confident you’ll win?” His voice matches the freezing temperature of his glare.

“I—” Normally, I am that confident. I’m nowhere near an optimist, but I now have a near-perfect streak when it comes to facing new fighters. It’s a combination of skill, experience, and dedication—along with the few benefits of working for Spencer, who’s well known for training his people. Not that anyone knows he makes us pay for the training. Still, it’s in my best interest to give myself the best possible chance, so I’ve invested whatever I can. “Based on precedence, I am likely to win, yes.”

“And that is exactly why this will work so well, Scarlet.”

“Because everyone will be betting on me,” I say numbly.

He nods, pleased I finally appear to understand. “As if I haven’t been kind enough, I’ll even sweeten the deal for you.” His eyes say what his mouth doesn’t: *“As if I need to give you anything at all, you poverty-stricken, useless shiftless piece of trash.”*

I swallow, unable to look away from the truth in his eyes as I croak, “What’s that?”

“I’ll double your winnings.” Spencer’s smile is that of someone who knows they hold all the cards. “With what I’m expecting to win, that will likely result in ninety bronze marks and change. Maybe even one silver.”

My heart patters in my chest. A silver mark would make a significant dent in my debt.

“But if you’re not up for it, I can find someone else to face Kait. Your earnings will continue to decrease as people lose interest in your fights.” He shrugs, shuffling papers and tapping a stack on his desk. “I would never

force anyone to do anything they don’t want to do. It’s your choice, after all.”

He knows it’s not a choice, but it doesn’t bother him even as his words are like a knife twisting in my gut.

I steady my breathing and force my lips to lift, even a little. “Do you have tips on losing with grace?”

Spencer’s entire face brightens more than even the dim lighting of his office. “Why, I’m so glad you asked.”

Skies knows the number of times I’ve walked this path, and yet, I never get used to the bright spotlights that nearly blind me, each step on the carpet taking me closer to The Cage. The crowd’s excitement is as palpable as the anxiety whipping through my veins. Does Kait feel the same as she approaches the other side of the ring? As she looks through the chain-link fence at her opponent—at me?

The Cage is only one part of the building known as Spencer’s Arena, though it is the most popular. Those who aren’t shouting at me—and, I’m sure, at Kait—are more interested in losing their money at the gambling tables around the other parts of the warehouse.

My heart pounds harder in my chest than when I walked up to my second ring fight. The first wasn’t so bad, because I hadn’t truly known what to expect. The second night? I knew to be afraid then.

I’ve never intentionally lost a fight, and while Spencer’s words of advice echo in my mind—barely audible through the pounding in my ears—uncertainty is a coiled snake in my stomach, writhing with the fear of being discovered. Would Spencer deduct my earnings out of anger? Would he add to the debt? It’s happened before.

The steps leading up to The Cage seem far more than the four I’ve taken countless times over the years. The judge’s eyes sweep emotionlessly over my scantily clad body—a sleeveless tank top tightly bound by wrappings and equally tight shorts to prevent unnecessary cloth catching or pulling—as he opens the gate for me from within. He says nothing when I climb in, walking away from me and toward the other side of the ring, blonde hair sticking to his forehead from the heat of the stuffy warehouse.

The roaring of the crowd is drowned out when my eyes meet Kait's. Confidence is written all over her sharp features as she takes me in. I catch the moment her observant gaze snags on the bruises and the barely healed cuts I still bear, the injuries a stark contrast over my skin. In this lighting, her complexion is even paler than mine, though hers is unmarred. From the quality of her clean, new-looking clothes, she can probably afford proper healers who don't take shortcuts.

The judge introduces us, telling the audience the scores of our wins and our losses, riling up the shifters outside of the ring until they're howling and hollering with the numbers the judge shouts.

"One who rarely loses here in The Cage. One who has yet to lose at all!" The judge screams something unintelligible. Everyone responds to his enthusiasm. "Bloody Scarlet and Kait the Bait!"

The sound of the bell echoes in the warehouse. The rest of the world dims, my vision narrowing until all I see is Kait and her wrapped hands, loosely fisted near her grinning face. Her confidence doesn't shake me, but my aching body does.

She doesn't wait for me to make the first move. As quick as lightning, Kait crosses the ring, fist aimed for my face.

I duck and land my own at her lower back. She grunts and stumbles, dropping to one knee. Before I can grab her, she rolls out of my grasp and rises, bouncing on her feet.

She's not smiling now.

I resist shaking my hand; I don't want her to know the punch had hurt. Thankfully, she doesn't seem to notice; her dark-blue eyes narrow as she thinks. With a sudden war cry that's drowned out by the thrumming of my blood in my ears, she launches at me again.

Feigning another dodge, I twist and drop an elbow between her shoulder blades. It sends a wave of aching through my arm. I bite back a snarl.

Kait growls with frustration but keeps her balance this time, stepping back to put distance between us.

By instinct, I follow, landing punch after punch as I push her toward the metal fencing of The Cage. She raises her arms to protect her head, so I lower my stance and hit just below the ribs instead.

I breathe through my mouth as my arms grow heavy, hoping the adrenaline will push it all aside as I focus entirely on taking her down—on survival.

But something makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand, and my attention shifts upward. Up past the top of the chain-link fence surrounding the ring. Up to the large windows on the second floor overlooking The Cage and everything on the main floor.

Up to Spencer's displeased expression as he watches, his dark glare obvious through the glass.

I freeze as I remember our agreement. His warning.

A sharp sting ripples through my scalp, forcing my attention back to Kait. She's wrapped my braided hair in her fist, teeth bared as she yanks again. I fall forward. Her knee rises.

Red-hot pain explodes across my face, racing down my torso and spreading to every limb.

Still bent over, I grab the hand fisted in my hair and take three quick strides backward, dragging her with me. She stumbles and tries to release my braids, but I keep her tethered to me as I straighten. Using her own momentum against her, I release her wrist and spin, kicking her in the head.

She drops.

My heart sinks.

Blood thunders in my ears as blood pours down my face. My ears ring from the ferocity of the crowd's excitement, but the satisfaction of having gained the upper hand has already dissipated when the ice of Spencer's glare pierces through the heat of the audience's chants of what sounds like my name.

Fatigue and pain dull my mind, but I understand the warning. I understand what he might do to me if I win.

So I cast my eyes back to Kait and will her to *get up*.

It must have been only seconds—otherwise, the judge would have stopped the fight—but it feels like an hour until her arms finally, slowly, push off the ground.

She rises with fire in her eyes and a fierce snarl.

I swallow my sigh of relief and sharpen my expression into one of disappointment.

Kait spits blood. It lands between my feet.

I would have responded in kind, but I still feel the noose of Spencer's words around my neck.

I lift my fists to my face.

She lunges.

I wait just a moment too late before ducking.

Her fist smashes into my face, and I see stars.

By pure instinct alone, I tighten my core and twist, sweeping a leg to knock her off her feet. Only fear of Spencer pulls it back at the last second, and I wince at the sudden change in direction.

Kait anticipates it and jumps. I take the chance to put distance between us as I pant and refocus. But each breath feels like a blade in my lungs, and every part of my body is on fire. I wipe the blood from my nose, nearly groaning from the pain. At this rate, I won't have to fake a loss.

She's on a win streak for a reason; she doesn't let me rest. Another fist comes my way, followed quickly by a kick just above my knee.

My leg buckles. I drop hard to the ground, landing heavily on my hand. More pain explodes in my wrist, shooting up my arm. It hurts so much, it feels like the pain chokes the very breath from me even as I battle the instinct to fight back.

Her foot connects with my face, and my vision blurs in a way that has nothing to do with rolling to avoid her next kick.

The crowd's jeering pierces through my fog of pain. I deliberately take longer than necessary to push myself up onto all fours, but doing so brings pain spearing up my arm. I nearly fall when my wrist gives out.

The crowd gets louder.

Kait stalks toward me with the slow prowl of a predator, but her gait is uneven. My mind screams at me to rise and kick at that limp, but I take a long, raspy breath and force myself to stay down even as she gets closer. Even as the fire of victory brightens her eyes.

Suddenly, she pauses, head tilting to one side. In my haze of pain, I follow her gaze and listen.

The crowd isn't cheering.

They're booing.

At her.

Kait's brows pull together in confusion, but I'm used to the jeers. After what Spencer said, it made sense why they'd started booing me recently. The shifters are here for entertainment; they want to see the shiftless beat each other senseless for no reason other than we have to. For no reason other than to entertain them. Watching me win over and over meant I had become predictable. No longer fun.

I guess they're entertained now.

“Get up, Bloody Scarlet!” someone shouts.

“Quit playing with the new kid!” another screams.

“She’s nothing compared to you!” says someone in the back.

Hurt flickers across Kait’s face. She’s still too new—she hasn’t yet hardened her heart to the fickle desires of the crowd. Her bandaged, bloody hands curl into fists as she turns from them to refocus on me.

Someone from beyond the ring yells, “She’s throwing the fight!”

The words freeze my blood in my veins.

“Yeah!” An audience member agrees, repeating, “She’s throwing the fight!”

My head pulses as the chain-link fence closes in on me, squeezing me and pressing on my lungs.

“Bloody Scarlet’s losing on purpose!” another voice shrieks.

My eyes lift and meet Spencer’s. His face is stony with anger.

I rise on unsteady legs. Kait ignores them and stomps toward me. But the damage has been done.

The crowd is chanting.

“Throwing! The! Fight!”

“Throwing! The! Fight!”

Then, to my horror, the words change into something much, much worse.

“Cheater! Cheater!”

“Spencer’s! A! Cheater!”

No. No.

My throat constricts. My breathing quickens.

“Spencer’s! A! Cheater!”

No. Spencer only loves two things in this world.

Himself and money.

If they think…If they want their money back…

Panic grips my heart with claws as cold as the metal links caging us in here. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what is right. My heart tells me I must fight—I must win. It’s what I’ve always done. It’s how I’ve survived so long on my own.

But I’m afraid. I’m so afraid.

I’m afraid of what Spencer might do in retaliation. I’m terrified of how he might punish me. I’m so scared of what this will mean for my future. Of whether I’ll ever be free from his control.

I want to be free. I want it so badly it hurts.

But what do I do? What do I do?

Kait springs on me.

I act without thinking.

I duck her first strike, but I let the second land.

My eyes flit up to Spencer's.

The crowd gets louder.

"Cheater! Cheater!"

Kait's fist collides with my side. I think she cracked a rib.

"Cheater!"

I spit blood.

He wears the hint of a smirk.

I step into Kait's kick. I buckle and fall.

Spencer's smiling widely now.

But right before Kait's fist hits my shoulder, the crowd's jeering changes once more.

And Spencer frowns.

"Give us our money back!" someone shouts.

"Refund!" shrieks a male voice.

The others join in. "Refund! Refund!"

Spencer's frown is so deep, I know the repercussions will hurt more than Kait could ever hope to inflict upon me.

"Refund! Refund! Refund!" The voices of shifters mix, becoming a braid—a noose—around my neck even as Kait pummels me into the ground.

Even as I refuse to fight back.

My head cracks against the hard floor of the ring. I see stars.

Still, I don't counter—not the way my gut says I should.

"Fight back!" growls a feminine voice. "Come on!"

I peel open my eyes, blink past the blood, and see Kait.

Kait straddles me, one hand holding me down as her other fist slams into my cheek. It doesn't hurt as much as it should, though I don't know if it's because I'm losing feeling or if she's pulling her punches.

"You need to fight back," she hisses.

I blink the blood from my eyes once more and realize tears are in hers.

"I wanted to fight and win against Bloody Scarlet—the *right* way." Her voice is low. No one else will hear us, especially not from the outrage

circling the ring. “No one will believe I beat you fair and square. Not like *this*.”

Her fist slams into my temple, and my world spins.

“I’m sorry,” I gasp. “I—I can’t…”

“They’re making her throw the fight!” A male voice rises through the throngs. “They should just fight her themselves!”

“Yeah, the cowards!”

Kait gasps, and suddenly, I can breathe again.

“No!” she shrieks. “I can do this! Let me do this!”

The desperation in her voice would have been heartbreaking if I hadn’t heard the crowd’s next words.

“If she’s going to lose, she should lose to someone who can beat her for real!”

I push up onto my elbows and cough, holding my ribs as if I can keep them together. Through bleary eyes, I watch as Gerard and the judge struggle with hauling Kait out of The Cage. She doesn’t make it easy for them, screaming and kicking the entire way.

The crowd is even more restless now. The shifters push and shove, while some look as though they might even fight each other.

But they settle down as one voice rises above them all.

“If it’s a show you want, it’s a show you’ll get.” Spencer is ice cold as he walks across the floor, parting the crowd. His hands, whirling with silvery shifter magic, lift high in the air. He’s not the tallest man here, nor is he the biggest by far, but everyone knows the bear shifter’s influence around here. “You all know the might of our very own Bloody Scarlet, yes?”

The people cheer.

Cowards. Where did all their booing go, now that Spencer himself is here?

“And you’ve all seen the strength of our guards?” He tilts his head toward Gerard and the judge, who are still wrestling with a shrieking Kait.

They cheer again.

I rise to my feet, willing my legs to stay steady. Willing the pain to keep from creeping into the edges of my mind so I might keep my wits about me.

Because I don’t like the gleam in Spencer’s eye.

Something bad is coming for me, and I worry it’s something I won’t survive.

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CHAPTER

FOUR

Despite the shifters' cries for fairness, nothing about this is fair.

I'm beaten, bleeding, and fairly sure my hand is broken in at least one place.

Yet, the crowd screams with joy when Spencer's man—a guard named Samyel, I think—strides into The Cage.

A guard who's also a bear shifter.

As one of Spencer's newer additions, Samyel and I haven't had the chance to talk much. Now that he circles me in the ring, I don't know if I'm glad for it. Maybe if I'd talked to him more in the past, I'd know more about him than the one terrifying rumour circling the warehouse.

The wild look in his eyes makes me believe the whispers that Samyel and his bear are unbonded, but as he takes his time studying me, I see the beginnings of fine lines on his face. He must be at least forty, meaning he would be extremely old for an unbonded shifter. It's more likely he's bonded, but lacks control of his bear.

Which almost makes him as dangerous as an unbonded shifter.

My blood rages against the injustice. The crowd had screamed for a fair fight, but shifters aren't allowed in The Cage. I've only ever fought other shiftless.

Shifters are the entertained. Shiftless are the entertainment.

I shove the thoughts away, because nothing is fair for the shiftless, and I need to focus on surviving.

Casting a glance past Samyel, who's rolling his shoulders, I look at Spencer for any inkling of direction. His grin is even bigger than his guard's

as the judge returns. The two walk up the steps, open the door, and step into The Cage.

For a moment, I worry Spencer's going to make me fight all three of them as he turns in a slow circle with his arms raised.

"Bloody Scarlet here is one of our best fighters—"

The crowd cheers.

"—and I hear you when you say you want to be entertained—"

The cheers increase in volume.

"—so how about I make things more interesting for you?" Spencer's voice booms above the applause. "Bloody Scarlet will fight our newest guard, Samyel." He pauses for the drama. "A shifter."

The audience hesitates for barely one second as they realize what Spencer is promising. A shiftless facing a shifter in The Cage—it's simply not done. Not in my time here, nor anywhere else that I've heard of, but they clearly love the idea.

"And to ensure you know we're not cheating, because you know I don't cheat"—Spencer laughs as if he would never even consider the idea, the liar—"I will make things more interesting for our own Bloody Scarlet."

More interesting?

I keep my face neutral and resist stomping my foot just to keep my knees from trembling.

Spencer turns his green eyes to mine, letting me see the full force of his malice and amusement, as he says the next words. "If Bloody Scarlet the shiftless can beat Samyel the bear shifter, I will consider her debt repaid." His lips turn up. "In full."

All my pains disappear. The roaring of my head drowns out the roaring of the crowd. I think my heart stops beating.

Three thousand golds, three-hundred-sixty-two silvers, forty-six bronze, and seventeen coppers.

One fight to clear it all.

My mouth dries at the amount. I swallow, but my tongue is thick in my mouth, and my hands are numb.

But then I turn to the bear shifter in front of me, and I know why Spencer has offered this ridiculous deal. It truly is just to rouse the people. There's no chance I will win against his guard, and he knows it. Samyel knows it, too.

And so do the audience.

Everyone knows it, but no one cares. They just want to be amused.

Spencer doesn't tell me to lose; he doesn't need to.

My body is numb. My mind dawdles. I almost miss the ring of the bell.

Everything moves at a sluggish pace; I watch as Spencer turns and closes The Cage behind him. Watch as the judge steps to the side. Watch as Samyel cracks his knuckles.

He tenses. He springs.

Slow.

He moves so slowly.

But my legs are lead, and I can't get out of the way. I watch as his fist comes toward me. His eyes light with pleasure at the pain he's about to inflict.

I will myself to duck, to twist, to do anything. But nothing works as the entire world moves at the speed of molasses.

When his massive fist collides with my face, the explosion of pain brings me back to the present. Whatever spell my own mind had cast upon my body, locking me in place from the panic and fear, is dispersed by the blaring alarms of hot pain shooting through me.

I'm thrown to the ground, the blood already on my skin making me slide across the uneven floor that's seen so many rounds of violence.

My body acts on its own, and I let it. I don't let my thoughts hinder what my instincts know as I tighten my core and twist into a roll, bouncing up onto my feet and blinking the stars out of my eyes.

Existing aches finally disappear as adrenaline whips through my veins, my mind finally clearing so I can focus on what I need to do.

Survive.

Samyel tilts his head. I don't wonder why. I'm already considering him—his size, his weight, his speed.

He hasn't tapped into his shifter powers yet; he's free of the silvery strands indicating the usage of his bear's magic. That doesn't mean he won't.

As a bear shifter, he's big and he's powerful. I don't feel the pain right now, but I know I will soon. I can't let him land another hit.

Luckily for me, big usually means slow. I have little doubt I'm quicker, so long as he doesn't use his bear.

Samyel crooks a finger, taunting me to start the next round of our dance. I exhale and test my theory.

Staying light on my feet, I hurl myself at him, taking care to avoid slipping on the blood already staining the floor.

As expected, he can't turn fast enough to catch me as I dart around him.

Unfortunately, the size inhibiting his speed also means I can't seem to inflict any pain as I punch him in the stomach with no effect.

A hook to his side does nothing, too.

While it doesn't hurt my hand now, I'll feel it once the rush of adrenaline wears off. I'll feel everything.

Because I have to survive. I have to. This is the best chance I've ever been given, and I can't think of anything I want more than to escape from someone else's clutches and finally—*finally*—have control of my own life again.

It's when I slip around him and smash my elbow into his lower back that he finally shows signs of pain.

So I take two steps back and spin, slamming my heel at the same, tender spot. The force of my kick alone might not have sent him flying, but combined with the fist he'd already taken, he drops to one knee.

Taking a page out of Kait's book, I grab a fistful of his short dark hair and push, shoving his face into my knee.

He roars with pain, but again, he's too slow as he lifts his hands up to mine.

I dart back, putting distance between us. Though I don't feel the ache in my bones, I gasp for air from the effort, take deep gulps, and will them to fill my lungs and replenish my energy. My legs wobble, but I hop from one foot to the other and settle into my fighting stance as he pushes up, nearly frothing at the mouth with frustration.

I don't laugh. I don't smile. I don't taunt him at all.

I also don't give him the satisfaction of making the first move as I sprint forward, jumping into the air and twisting so my legs wrap around his neck, letting momentum smash him back onto the ground. He drops with a loud thud.

Glancing up into the crowd, my eyes find Spencer's immediately. Though his face is expressionless, his eyes promise pain.

But exhilaration fills me instead of fear, because he made me a promise. He made me a promise *in front of everyone*. Life is unfair, but even he can't go back on his word. Not when the entire building heard what he'd said.

So, I keep my legs locked around Samyel as I throw one fist after another. I hit his temples, his cheeks, his nose. Both my hands protest even through the adrenaline, but I don't let go, because this is my chance at freedom. And I'm not letting my freedom go.

Suddenly, Samyel growls, and it's not the growl of a man. Glowing, silvery strands appear, whirling around his head. They dance around his neck, flowing through my legs as though I were nothing but air.

In my moment of uncertainty, something hard collides with my back. I gasp from pain and release him, pushing off and back as far as I can while my vision spots.

His growling intensifies as the magic continues whirling, wrapping his body until it almost looks like he wears a suit of silver armour.

My heart skips in my chest, threatening to jump out from between my ribs and show the entire crowd just how afraid I am.

I was worried he'd use his bear's powers, but I didn't think he'd actually…

Samyel's eyes darken from their natural pale blue until his glare is black with hatred.

The rumours are sort of true, then.

While he seems to have succeeded in his Bonding Ordeal, those black eyes mean he barely passed—barely bonded—otherwise, he would have retained his human eyes. When in their animal forms, shifters don't think in words like humans do, but those in control get to keep the parts that make them who they are; they can still understand situations and other humans despite lacking the ability to speak.

Some shifters have so little control that simply using even one of their animal's abilities will cause a full shift. Others can push the limit in many ways before losing themselves entirely; it all depends on the individual's abilities.

I have no way of knowing how much control Samyel has over his bear, so I have no way of knowing how unpredictable he is. Are his human senses even in there, or is his bear the one I'll be facing?

I shake out my hands and roll my neck, steeling my spine against the snarling expression still sneering at me behind the translucent, bearish features glowing across his face and his arms.

Taking a deep breath, I force myself to ignore the excited whoops of the audience. I've had to be careful to avoid getting hit, and I still have to keep

it up. I just need to be faster now, because his bear's reflexes are better than mine.

Samyel opens his mouth and releases an inhuman roar, his canines unnaturally long on his human face.

I dash to the side, but when I blink, he's already in front of me. I only have time to brace for impact as the whirling strands of magic on his hand solidifies into a giant paw with deadly claws.

His bear paw slams into the forearms I'd raised to protect my head, beating me into the metal links of The Cage's fences.

Every muscle in my body is taut. My ragged breaths are loud in my ears.

I lower my arms and drag myself around the ring on unsteady legs with still-blurry vision as the thumping of his stomps bring him closer.

I lift my hands and take my position again, telling myself I'm ready for another round. I don't think about the audience. I don't think of my debt. I don't even think of Spencer. My eyes see only Samyel's chest rising and falling with his heavy breathing, looking as if it's taking every bit of internal strength to keep even a modicum of control over his bear.

The rage in his black eyes is different from anything I've ever witnessed in anyone else, and I realize how lucky I've been—until now—to have fought only other shiftless.

Samyel is physically here, but mentally, he's been reduced to a beast battling his own monster, angry and frustrated from always fighting a different part of himself for control. He's wild and unpredictable, and even without using his magic and unleashing his bear, there's a chance he wouldn't have held back from killing me. Now, with his shift visibly struggling for dominance, at the first chance he gets, he'll shred me to pieces and—

I pause.

Something's not right, and it's not just the heaving shifter in front of me.

My arms are not bleeding. They're not fine; they're bruised, battered, and I'm certain there are a few hairline fractures.

But they're not bleeding.

My arms haven't been sliced to ribbons even though I'm certain Samyel had swatted me with those claws.

Another roar yanks me from my thoughts.

I don’t have time to ponder. He’s wrested control for the moment and charges at me, arms pumping at his sides. His legs, wrapped by shifter magic, move faster than my eyes can catch. In one heartbeat, he’s in front of me again.

In a second, I’m ducking his swing.

By the third, he’s slapped me right across the face, throwing me into the air once more.

The metal chains dig into my back, but I know for sure this time.

I felt his claws.

Except—it was almost as if they just…slid off my face.

I felt the strength of his paw, the press of his claws. The bruises may form before the fight is even over.

But the claws did little more than bludgeon. There was no sharpness, no slicing, no cutting.

In the flickering moments when Samyel is in his own mind, he seems confused, too. But his bear quickly wrenches control.

I don’t know whether the crowd has noticed, but even in the dull ringing in my ears, they seem to shout louder.

Rolling my shoulders back to test my pains, I dare to give him a little smile. Samyel gains more of his bear’s speed and power the more frustrated he gets, but he’s also more clumsy, and he makes more mistakes.

He charges. I sidestep at the last moment. His paws swing at empty air. I kick the back of his knee and dart out of his reach.

Every time he misses, his growls grow in intensity.

I have to end this.

I have to end this before he loses all control and—

It’s too late.

My limbs freeze. My skin prickles. My heart drops into my stomach.

The silver-white strands of magic extend until they whirl furiously over every part of him. If he’s a lesser shifter, I have maybe two minutes. If he’s one of the more powerful ones, I’ll face a fully shifted and uncontrolled bear in thirty seconds.

I swallow the rising lump in my throat, but it only joins my heart at the pit in my stomach. How do I take down a bear without weapons? Especially a bear shifter, because they are larger than their natural-born counterparts.

What can I do? What can I do? What can I—

Samyel the bear stomps out from the whirlwind of magic, each of his four thick, heavy paws sending deep reverberations through the soles of my feet. Every little hair on my skin stands on end, and the pit in my stomach becomes a void threatening to swallow me whole.

His claws might not shred my flesh, but his roar chills my heart. I've seen plenty of shifters in their animal forms. I've even seen people like Gerard, who resemble mountains when they shift.

But nothing in this life or any other could have ever prepared me to face a shifted bear in The Cage.

I take shuddering breaths, as if forcing the air into my lungs might clear the haze of fear, pain, and everything else from my mind. It doesn't, but at least it's something I can control.

Samyel releases another roar, and it mixes with the crowd's thirst for blood. Some have even shifted themselves, because several animal eyes follow me through the chain links.

Skies, I hope this will be the end of it.

It has to be.

Spencer promised—he promised in front of everyone.

For my freedom, I have to believe that stands for something.

Samyel lowers his head and charges. The sight of a massive, black-brown bear rushing at me finally wrenches me from the fear keeping me rooted to the spot. I steel my spine and force myself to stay still. I force myself to wait. And wait.

And wait.

At the very last moment, I jump out of the way.

Samyel crashes into the fence. For a moment, I hold my breath in hopes he's at least dazed.

To my horror, it doesn't affect him at all. Instead, he takes several unsteady steps back and shakes his head, leaving a massive, bear-sized dent in the metal fence behind him.

His black eyes clear as they lock on me. His paws twitch, and he's rushing toward me again.

I let my instincts take over. Without thinking, without hesitation, I let out what I hope is an intimidating war cry as I sprint forward to meet him.

His eyes widen, as if even his bear's brain can't fathom the idea that I, a shiftless who is less than half his size, would ever consider charging at him, the powerful shifter.

I don’t even know what I will do. We’re racing toward each other far too fast for either of us to stop.

But only I am small enough to change direction at the last second.

Right as we’re about to collide, I turn so fast my ankle protests the shift in weight. But it works.

He continues, unable to stop, and he crashes into the side of The Cage once more. This time, he breaks the fence, bending a pole in half and exposing jagged metal pieces around it.

I have no plan. No idea. I just crouch and jump, throwing myself onto his back and wrapping my arms around his thick, furry neck.

I feel the moment he realizes what’s happening; the muscles of his entire body tense so hard, they ripple even through his thick fur.

He roars and rages and howls, frenzied in his rage.

But I hang on.

He rises, standing on two legs.

But I hang on.

He throws his paws behind him, thumping and clawing at me.

But I hang on.

His paws are heavy and his claws are hard. I squeeze my eyes shut against the bludgeoning, the pounding, the walloping he inflicts upon my bruised and broken body.

I can’t hold back the tears from the pain of his thick claws smashing against my arms. The weight of his heavy paws slamming me, over and over again.

I don’t know how much longer I can do this.

Still, I hang on. I squeeze my arms as tight as I can. I imagine squeezing through his fur, his muscle, and crushing his windpipe. I pray to the skies I block enough air—for just long enough—that he might lose consciousness.

But he continues to thrash, and I don’t think I can do this anymore.

A gasp escapes me. A moan.

I don’t think I can do this.

Just as I consider letting go, he stops beating on me. I take a deep breath and peel my eyes open when I feel the motion of his movements. He’s walking to the other side of The Cage.

Without warning, he charges.

Right for the exposed metal.

I scramble to let go, but his gait has turned uneven, and horror spreads in my chest when I realize I can't push myself off because he's gripping me to him *with one of his paws*.

Can bears even do this? Is he able to—

It doesn't matter. None of it matters. Because Samyel is holding me to him, and he is charging toward the sharp, jagged metal.

Either he plans to throw us both into that fence, or he's going to throw me onto it and hope he survives.

Either way, I'm not going down like this. I will earn my freedom, even if I have to impale a bear.

He has a tough grip on my arm, but I have enough space to move and adjust. I press my feet on his back to position myself. I tighten every muscle in my body, ignore all the aches, all the peals of warning, and prepare for the moment.

And pray to the skies this will work.

I take a deep breath and hold it.

Right before we collide with the sharpened edges, I exhale and kick off from his back, launching myself upward. His claws dig into my flesh—not cutting my skin but nearly crushing my bones—and tether me to him by our arms.

Samyel was in the middle of pivoting, but he's thrown off balance as I feel the momentary weightlessness of being upside down with my legs in the air. I watch with horror as the bear turns and slides, his side crashing into the sharp, exposed pieces of metal, impaling himself on the jagged pole.

He releases my hand.

My back slams against the top half of the—thankfully still intact—fence, knocking the breath from my lungs. With no energy left, I can do nothing more than protect my head as I fall, colliding with the floor of The Cage in a heap of pain and blood and sadness.

I don't want to fight anymore. I don't want to pay debts anymore. I just want to lie here on the cold, hard ground and never stand again.

But the thunderous applause and screams and shouts and whooping and everything in between—it's loud enough to hear past the fog covering my mind. It's loud enough to make me turn my head and crack an eye open to where Samyel groans, still in his bear form.

My mouth dries. A sob gets stuck in my throat. I didn’t want this. I didn’t want him so wounded. I didn’t want him to die.

I just wanted to survive.

Rough hands grab my wrists and yank me until I’m standing on weak legs.

The judge pulls one of my hands high above my head. Spencer pulls my other hand up.

Together, they scream at the top of their lungs, “BLOODY SCARLET IS OUR WINNER!”

I just want to cry.

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CHAPTER

FIVE

After much fanfare and a long visit with the healers, Gerard walks me through the halls and toward Spencer's office.

"You didn't have to do that," I mutter, casting a glance up at the kind bear shifter at my side.

He doesn't look down at me. "You deserved a proper healing after surviving that. Consider it my congratulatory gift."

I shiver at the word *surviving*. I had said it to myself many times during the ordeal, but hearing it from someone else—hearing it out loud—makes it feel real. Still, my heart warms at the thought of finally being freed from my debt—my parent's debt—to Spencer, despite the anticipation twisting in my gut.

"Do you think he'll do it?" I whisper. Spencer had looked so angry during my fight with Kait. He'd looked even worse when I won against Samyel. And now, he has to spend extra marks healing the guard.

Gerard looks down at me without turning his head. "Do what?"

"Forgive…forgive the debt." I can't bear to say it any louder. It's what I've wanted since I was old enough for Jonas and Janica to teach me what debt was, and since siblings left me, it's been the only thing I've wanted for four years.

What will I eat as my first meal with money I earned and kept for myself?

What will I fix first in my old home?

Glee bubbles in my chest despite my best efforts; I can hardly wrap my head around the possibility of finally being free.

"I think Spencer is a man of his word."

I almost vibrate with happiness, but Gerard's heavy hand clamps over my shoulder, stopping me in my tracks. He turns me so we face each other.

The worry on his tight expression dampens my joy, bringing me back to reality.

"But you need to be careful, Scarlet."

The quiet chuckle that escapes me is a little manic as I'm reminded Spencer could very well simply laugh in my face. "What more could he do to me? He already owns my entire life."

Gerard's bright eyes study my face as if debating whether he should speak his mind. In the end, he sighs and shakes his head.

"I know there are fates worse than death," I whisper, looking past his arm and at the rough edges of the flickering lantern behind him. "But I have to believe there's more. I have to believe there is a chance, slim as it may be, that I can be free of him. I don't—I don't want to keep fighting. I don't want to keep doing things on his terms. On anyone's terms but my own."

I flex my fingers, looking at my clean hands and feeling the bone-deep ache that remains despite the bronze marks Gerard had spent for the healer to fix me. I've heard even the best healers here are incomparable to the ones available to the Dracori—the shifters who work for the king and enforce his laws. That's what it's like living under Spencer's thumb. His healers. His ring. His fights. Everything is on his terms.

"I understand." Gerard looks like he wants to say something more, but he meets my gaze and exhales. "Just…be careful, okay?"

I nod and smile, letting him see the sincerity of my appreciation in my eyes. He doesn't hide the worry in his.

Spencer's door comes into view, and Gerard gives me a knowing look. With the slightest dip of his chin, he turns to leave.

I breathe deeply and knock, almost wishing I'd kept the hand wraps, so I'd at least have something to fidget with.

Before I knock a second time, a muffled, "Come in," sounds from within the office. I bite my lip and release it, then open the door.

Spencer is in his usual spot, seated at his wooden desk. His head is down as he scribbles onto the pages of a thick book. The lanterns around his office flicker with that cheap light, casting everything in the blue-tinged glow I hate. He looks so normal, I almost forgot how angry he'd been just an hour earlier.

He doesn’t address me right away, so I don’t take a seat just yet. Spencer’s never been outwardly violent with me, but I just cost him a lot of marks. I’d at least like to be standing if he decides tonight is the night to take his anger out on me.

The scratching of his pen seems to taunt me as I stay perfectly rigid on the other side of his desk. What if he’s adding more to my debt instead of clearing it? What if he doesn’t care that everyone witnessed his promise? It’s not as if they’d do anything to stand up for me, and it would be foolish to think otherwise. Shifters don’t risk their necks for shiftless.

Finally, after what feels like years of heavy silence, Spencer lowers his pen and looks slowly up in his unique way of looking down on me while remaining seated. He tilts his head toward the chair, his expression as stony as the cold floor.

I pull it out, wincing at the loud screech the feet make against the ground as I study Spencer warily.

He doesn’t appear angry, but he doesn’t appear happy, either. His shrewd eyes look me over, and I have the distinct impression he’s assessing me of my value—like a hunk of meat or like a piece of furniture. Like Spencer is trying to decide how much I’m worth, and how little I matter. The cohua stick bobs up and down as he chews on the other end.

I nearly cave and clear my throat, but he speaks first.

“Congratulations, Bloody Scarlet.” He holds my gaze before studying me once more. “It seems you’ve already celebrated with your earnings.”

It takes me a moment to realize he means my injuries. I’m rarely healed to the point none are visible.

“It was time,” I say cautiously.

“Well,” he says, sighing. My heart skips a beat before flopping in my chest. “It seems our time working together has come to an end.”

It takes everything in me to keep my jaw from dropping. To keep from asking if he really means it, even as he continues.

“It’s been a good four years, and we’ve each made some money. I do loathe to part ways, but a promise is a promise, isn’t it?” The bobbing cohua stick distracts me, making it even more difficult to process what he’s saying. “Let’s see here…”

My breath is stuck in my throat. Or in my nose. Or wherever breathing happens.

“Here we are. Bloody Scarlet. Three thousand golds, three-hundred-sixty-two silvers, forty-six bronze, and seventeen coppers.” He lifts the pen and, with a flourish, crosses out my name in one motion.

I blink, because that’s all I can do.

“Here you are. Crossed off. Out of my book.” Spencer slams the tome shut and gives me a strange smile. Then he reaches under the table and unlocks a drawer. With the clinking of metal, he drops five bronze marks on the desk. “Enjoy your freedom, Scarlet.”

My jaw works, but words don’t come out.

He winks. “And don’t worry about the Samyel. Those responsible for this incident will be getting what they deserve.”

“Thank you,” I finally croak. Spencer’s tone is light, and I don’t like what he’s implying, but once I step out of this office, out of this building, it won’t be my problem anymore. I hadn’t wanted Samyel to get so hurt, and I still don’t want him to suffer or be in too much trouble—he was just doing his job, and we’re all indebted to Spencer in some way, after all—but it’s not up to me.

“All right. Off you go, then. I’ll miss ya, Bloody Scarlet.” Spencer winks once more, pushes the bronze marks to me, and shoos me out of his office. I can hardly remember how to use my limbs as I take the coins and pocket them, pushing myself up from the chair and turning, still numb to the reality of what’s happening. “And close the door behind you.”

The steps to the door feel unreal, and as I reach for the handle, I catch his expression twisting into something nasty.

But it’s not my problem. Not anymore.

I let the door click shut on the life I’m leaving behind.

The half moon is high in the sky, shining its bright, white light on me and the path ahead. Despite my bag being heavy with the meat from my traps, I feel lighter than I have in years, each step feeling like I’m walking on air as I make my way to Old Gary’s. Happiness bubbles in my chest, threatening to burst and carry me the rest of the way to the butcher’s shop.

A cat—a wild, natural-born creature, because shifters don’t shift into cats—darts out from the trees. She pauses when we catch sight of each

other, her sharp eyes reflecting green in the moonlight.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, keeping my voice low so as not to frighten her. Though, scaring her off might be better, considering what the other folks would do if they spotted her, even this far out of town.

Wild cats have a bad reputation all over Selerune. They’re often seen as bad omens, because they’re the one natural-born animal that has never had a shifter counterpart. Big cats, such as lion shifters and panther shifters, exist, but no one would ever expect a wild-cat shifter.

She comes closer, revealing striped, dark-brown fur and a bent tail, small nose twitching as she sniffs the air.

Poor thing.

“You know you shouldn’t be this close to town borders,” I say. She pauses, head tilting. “You’ll get hurt.”

Cats have never wronged me—not the way people have—so I don’t prescribe to the notion that they’re bad omens. It’s not their fault they were born this way.

“You can walk with me for a little while, if you wish. But *don’t* get too close to the border,” I warn, wagging a finger at her. People keep all sorts of animals, some as pets for leisure—if they can afford it—while others are for work or food. But no one keeps cats. In fact, cats are so hated, they’re often chased as far from town lines as possible.

Thankfully, she gives me a quick “Meow” before darting into the bushes. I let out a sigh of relief.

Shaking my head, I put thoughts of cats and taunting and hatred out of my mind, allowing that bubble of happiness to resurface.

I wanted to tell Gerard that Spencer had kept his promise, but the bear shifter was nowhere to be found, and I couldn’t stay in that wretched building one moment longer. I never got the chance to learn much about Gerard’s life outside of Spencer’s Arena, but I’ve seen some of the other guards around town, so I’m hopeful I’ll catch him one of these days. The thought of one day chatting with him outside of the warehouse fills my heart with warmth; he’s the closest thing to a friend that I have.

Which isn’t saying much.

But now that I’m free, maybe I’ll finally have the chance to make some real friends.

I could tell Old Gary about my new status. Sharing good news is what friends do, right? Even if we’re merely acquaintances now, perhaps doing

so will be a step in the right direction.

A smile spreads across my face, and try as I might, I can't stop it. The possibilities seem endless. The grouchy butcher will likely growl at me to quit smiling so much, and it won't dampen my mood at all, because I won't have to sell every piece of what I've caught. Not tonight. Possibly not ever again.

I'll be able to keep some meat for myself, and I might even buy more sweetmallow.

No, I will definitely buy more sweetmallow.

I'll go home with my sweetmallow and my meat, and I'll make the sweetest meat soup. Then, I'll go to bed warm and with a full belly.

And in the morning, I will wake up a free woman.

I'm thankful no one is around to see me giggle like a fool as the leaves crunch beneath my feet, having dried and blown onto the path from far too long without rain.

What if I also changed my path?

What if I could leave Grengrove and go elsewhere? To another town, to where no one knows my name, or perhaps even to a big city, like Kynbrook or Greybrook. That's where Anica went, and it seems to have worked out for her. As far as I know, anyway—she never writes.

It would be nice to live in a place where people don't know I fight for a living. Used to fight for a living.

That's going to take some getting used to.

I slap a hand over my face to keep it from splitting open at the idea of referring to *fighting* in the past tense. No more bruised knuckles. No more aches even healers can't take away.

Pressing my fingers to both cheeks in an attempt to cool my excited thoughts, I remind myself I would still need a place to live, even if I were to move away.

Still, it does nothing to extinguish my glee.

Because now, I can save up for it! Because saving my marks is a thing I'll be able to do—starting tonight.

My joy grows the closer I get to town, crunching and kicking brown leaves like the child that I am.

But when I look up, I freeze.

Thick plumes of black smoke rise into the air, twining with the distant clamour of the town's panic and fear; it smothers the happiness from my

chest, turning it into a rock that drops all the way to the bottom of my stomach as the edge of Grengrove comes into view.

All thoughts of freedom forgotten, I break into a sprint, racing for town.

The town where Old Gary lives.

The town where my home is.

The town that's currently on fire.

The fire is big, and it's *hot*.

It seems to have started at one house, the flames creating a blazing inferno around it and joining the burning of the surrounding homes.

"No!" The piercing shriek yanks me from my trance, but the chaos is so loud that no one else seems to hear the woman's cries.

"No!" she screams again. She clutches a small child to her chest, both of them smudged by soot and ash. The child does not move.

Another woman breaks through the crowd, pushing the others aside as silvery strands whirl around her arms, then her entire body. From the opaque shifter magic, a large bird with grey-brown feathers emerges. The bird nudges the sobbing mother from her child, hops onto the child's little chest, and flaps her wings.

Someone else screams, drawing my attention away. But I can't see the source—it's coming from all over. Everywhere I turn, I'm met with havoc and confusion.

My ears ring from the yelling. Men and women, shifters and shiftless alike, gather in crowds as a voice shouts instructions. Slowly but surely, people are roused into action. Lines form as humans strap buckets of water onto wooden poles balanced on both the shifted and natural-born animals.

A gust of wind blows smoke into the crowd, and I cough along with many others.

Loud cursing and screaming fill the air; I rub my burning eyes and look up. My heart clenches as my mind slowly understands what my blurred vision sees. The breeze fans the flames further into town—right toward Old Gary's shop. I have to help stop the fire.

Pressing the heel of my palms to my stinging eyes, I race to join the line of people filling water buckets when a loud trumpet declares the arrival of

the king’s Dracori. My shoulders slump with relief while many surrounding townsfolk sigh openly.

Proper help has arrived.

Not every town has Dracori permanently stationed within its borders; villages and smaller towns—like mine—borrow them from bigger ones and from cities as needed, whether to enforce the king’s laws or to help with emergencies.

Several horses join the fray, their riders jumping off to shout commands at those closest to them with instructions to clear the area. I take a few steps back but am jostled and pushed to the side by the groups of people rushing to make space for the shifters in the king’s signature red and gold.

Two other Dracori run toward the biggest flames with a long pike, stabbing at the burning pieces of the home’s remains while a third shouts at those with water buckets to pivot and bring their buckets over.

A loud cheering rings through the air, mixing with a roar. I turn as the crowd parts for a line of bears, tigers, and oxen shifters; they pull massive wagons teeming with barrels tied messily together, tossing their heads as several Dracori surround them and shout directions to position the wagons. Once satisfied, they rush to remove the yokes from their shifted colleagues, who immediately enshroud themselves with silvery magic.

Back in their human forms, they roll up their dark-red sleeves and work to unhook long hoses while the others attach one end to a barrel and drag the other end toward the flames.

Some Dracori stay with the wagons of water, pull out attachments that they place onto each barrel, then turn the handles; the hoses inflate, and water sprays from the other end, right onto the flames.

Relief courses through me as the water courses through the hoses, especially when horses arrive with even more wagons of water barrels.

“She’s here!” A hand wraps roughly around my arm, fingers tightening as the person pulls me to the side.

“Hey!” I protest, my voice hoarse from the smoke and fear as I stumble to follow. I can just about make out the dark hair of the taller man yanking me by the arm while he shoulders his way through the crowd. “Stop!”

Those around us either don’t hear or don’t care as the man drags me with him, pushing and shoving others aside until we break free from the crowd.

“What are you doing?” I struggle against him, but silver-white strands burst from his hands as he tightens his grip to keep me close. He must not be powerful, because his shifter’s magic barely strengthens his hold. I dig my heels into the ground and wrench my arm out of his grasp. He turns to face me, looking down at his empty hand in confusion.

I’m used to being looked down on. I’m used to being ignored. But the outright malice and hate in his eyes are strong enough that I take a step back. Anger flashes across his face, and his hand whirls with more magic as he reaches out to snatch my arm once more.

“Hey!” I protest. He doesn’t seem to care. The crowd murmurs and parts for us, averting their gazes when I look pleadingly at them.

I bite my lip and swallow a growl of frustration, trying to decide if defending myself against this man might be considered an acceptable reason for assaulting a shifter. He’s dragging me in front of all these witnesses, and while they don’t care to stop him, surely at least one person would come to my defence if he were to report me to the Dracori for attacking him?

I’m still considering my options when the man stops so suddenly, I would have rammed into his back if he hadn’t yanked me to the side.

“Here she is,” he says proudly, chest heaving from effort. The effort of what? The effort of hauling me here? I glance at where his fingers clench around my arm, his magic still whirling in quick, tight circles around his hand. Between the heavy breathing and the lack of his animal’s strength, he’s a weaker shifter than I thought.

“This is Scarlet?” rumbles a masculine voice.

I look up into the brown eyes of a Dracori who is clearly a wolf shifter —sometimes it’s obvious—staring down at me from his horse. Unlike those helping with the fire, his red and gold uniform is of a thicker variation, resembling armour. The golden thread of his red jacket shimmers in the white moonlight, the sleeve pulling up slightly to reveal gold bracers on his forearms when he reaches into his jacket pocket and retrieves an envelope. He opens it and pulls out a slightly crumpled piece of parchment.

When I don’t answer, the Dracori’s eyes narrow with contempt as he looks down his nose at me.

“Yes, she is.” The man at my side puffs his chest slightly. I can almost feel his ego rising to the skies as he tries to impress the younger man. “This is the one responsible.”

His words take me by surprise. I jerk back, my hand going to my throat. “What do you mean, I’m responsible? Responsible for what?”

I look between the weasel shifter—what else could he be?—and the wolf Dracori, who only studies the parchment a moment more before slipping it back into the envelope and tucking both into his jacket. He straightens his clothes, then dismounts.

Panic swirls in my chest, bubbling nauseatingly to my throat when I realize they can only mean one thing. “Wait, you have to believe me. I didn’t do this.”

“You most certainly did,” the weasel sneers.

I bare my teeth. If we weren’t in front of a Dracori, I’d have hit him for sure—and called it self defence. “I wasn’t even here.”

“The letter says—”

“What letter?” I snarl, hands flexing at my sides. He’s no stronger than I am. Maybe even weaker, if his lack of shifter magic is any indication. I’m sure I can take him. Teach him not to tell lies just because his victim is shiftless.

“This one,” answers the Dracori, voice dripping with disdain. He points to the breast of his deep-red jacket, to where I’d watched him place the envelope. “It declares you’re responsible for…” He casts his eyes at the multiple blazes painting everyone orange against the darkness of the night, the flames adding to his ominous aura and making the golds of his royal armour extra bright. “…all of this.”

“Let me see it!” I shout, sticking my hand out before I realize what I’m doing. What I’m demanding, and from whom.

His face pinches with contempt, eyes lowering to my open palm. I almost shrink, but I steel my spine and keep my shoulders from curling in. I’m not backing down—not from such an outlandish accusation. Not when such an accusation could cost me everything, just as I’ve just clawed my way out of nothing.

The Dracori’s upper lip curls, and his hand twitches on the hilt of the sword on his belt. To my surprise, he actually reaches into his jacket and deposits the envelope into my open palm without a word.

The envelope is thin and light, and I clutch at it, worried another breeze might send it into the roaring flames beyond the crowd. Though, maybe that would have been for the best, because the parchment isn’t heavy, but its implications are. My mind splits as my blood roars. I know I have nothing

to do with the fire, but another part of me, the louder part, screams that I need to run. That I mustn’t stay here a moment longer. Because the Dracori would not have given me the letter if he weren’t confident of its contents.

Both men watch as my shaking hands try to open the envelope. The thundering in my ears muffles the havoc still loud around us, and I feel like it takes so long that one of them will spring upon me and tear it open themselves.

When I finally read the letter, I wish I’d listened to the half of my mind that wanted me to run.

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CHAPTER

SIX

“Congratulations on having earned your freedom, Bloody Scarlet,” I read the words—each sharper than the last—as the note slices my insides in ways only Spencer can. My hands shake so hard, the page threatens to escape my fingers. But I continue, my hoarse voice barely croaking out the next sentence, “Consider your debts repaid.”

I swallow as Spencer’s cruel words settle like stones in my stomach.

“See?” the weasel sneers. “This is the Scarlet. She fights at Spencer’s under the name *Bloody Scarlet*.” He spits as if the name itself is bitter on his tongue.

I would have agreed—or at least said something in defence—but my head spins. I can’t think. My throat threatens to close as my chest feels like it’s collapsing on itself.

“Do you deny you are the so-named Bloody Scarlet in the letter?” the wolf shifter asks in a tone implying he already knows the answer.

“I—” I tremble, the letter crumpling in my quivering hand.

“She is,” the weasel insists. “Ask anyone. Everyone knows it.”

The crowds, though curious, have made space for us, either to give us privacy or out of fear of angering a Dracori, so the nearest bystander is farther than the weasel must have expected when he turns to reach for someone.

The Dracori steps forward and stops him in his tracks with a heavy hand on the weasel’s shoulder. The older man’s brows rise, but he immediately backs down, shrinking beneath the wolf shifter’s presence.

The Dracori looks at me for confirmation.

I shake so hard, my entire body vibrates.

But I nod.

Immediately, I know it was the wrong thing to do.

Because that’s all he needs for a confession.

It doesn’t matter that I’m only confirming I fight for Spencer as Bloody Scarlet. It doesn’t matter that I’m only confirming the letter is addressed to me.

To the Dracori and his scorn, I’ve confessed my responsibility for Grengrove’s fire.

“Scarlet, I am arresting you for treason against the king and his people for harming the people of Selerune by causing fire to the town of Grengrove.” He glares at me and shakes his head. “And so close to the harvest, too.”

“B-but I didn’t!” I stammer. The wolf shifter takes the note and envelope out of my hand and slips them back into his jacket. “That—I don’t know what Spencer means. It has nothing to do with the fire!”

He yanks both my wrists to him, the leather of his gloves rough on my skin. “The letter was found among other fire-starting items. It was addressed to you. The words on it are clear.”

“But I didn’t start it!” I try to wrench my wrists from his, but he doesn’t even need his shifter magic to hold me. “I was out in the woods, checking on my traps. You can see my bag! I was on my way to Old Gary’s! I couldn’t possibly have started the fire!”

“Whether you set it or persuaded someone else to start it does not matter. You are the one at fault. It is clear.” The Dracori reaches behind him for his belt, pulling a pair of thin metal loops connected by a chain. With a snap of his wrist, both loops open halfway.

“Is it?” I shriek at the sight of the silencing cuffs, my voice climbing with each word as he closes the metal around my wrists. “He freed me of the debt because I defeated one of his guards in The Cage! Not for setting a fire! Or for telling him where to set a fire!”

The guard looks up from adjusting the bindings. “How would you know that if you weren’t the one who told him where to start it?” He smirks, as if he’s caught me in a lie.

I balk.

“That’s just obvious, isn’t it?” My breaths shorten, but I force myself to still. “I told you, it wasn’t me. My debt was cleared for something else. Please, please talk to Spencer. He’ll tell you.”

The Dracori smiles wolfishly. “We already did. Why do you think we were late to aid with the fire?”

“You…” I deflate as I stare at the dull, black jewel the size of a fingernail embedded on each iron cuff. As I remember Spencer’s words.

Those responsible for this incident will be getting what they deserve.

I release a shuddering breath, my insides turning cold.

I’d thought he meant Samyel was in trouble for losing to me in front of everyone. I’d thought—

My head swivels, as though I can see through the crowd. As though I can part them with my gaze alone. I can’t, but the memory is clear in my mind’s eye.

The mother and the little child. Their house was the one I’d suspected had burned first. I hadn’t realized it before, but now that numbness spreads over me, my thoughts have cleared. The child looked far too similar to Samyel for this to have been a coincidence.

Spencer must have had his guard’s home burned and then framed me for it, knowing the Dracori would not care enough to investigate. Knowing he would get his revenge on both of us at once.

I stop struggling. I stop fighting.

Even though a deep part of me grows more frantic with each passing second, even though that side of me continues shrieking, continues raging, my entire body stills as the Dracori tightens the chain of my shackles. The sound echoes through my empty mind.

“You don’t need to use silence stones.” I hear myself mumble through the buzzing in my head. “I don’t—I’m not a shifter.”

I can’t bear to say I’m shiftless, because that word—*being* that word—is what got me here. It’s the single root cause of all my problems.

I wouldn’t have had this debt strapped to my back.

I wouldn’t have had to fight for survival.

I wouldn’t have had to fight for my freedom.

If only I’d been a shifter.

The sun rises, but the darkest part of the night is not over—not for me.

Not when I’m sitting in the Dracori’s wagon, wrists bound in front of me and feet planted on the wooden floor to keep myself upright as the wheels bump against the uneven road.

I would be grateful it’s not raining, but rain would have helped quell the fire at Grengrove.

Besides, I can’t feel anything. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I know my body must experience the pain and ache of sitting motionless for so many hours on the hard wooden bench. Yet, nothing registers. Nothing penetrates the fog of disbelief, except maybe for the moments of overwhelming despair.

So in comparison, discomfort and pain might have been better.

At least the numbness keeps me from thinking about things I can’t control; things that make everything worse, that make my head heavy with grief.

Like what if the Dracori couldn’t stop the fire from spreading?

Like what if the flames had burned Old Gary’s butcher shop to the ground?

Like why everyone watched as the Dracori took me away?

No one said a word.

No one stood up for me.

The wagon stops. I’m grateful the harsh motion drags me from my spiralling mind.

When I finally lift my eyes, I see buildings of a town I don’t recognize, but we couldn’t have travelled far. The day has barely begun, and aside from the Dracori, only market vendors are on the roads.

“Comfortable?” sneers a Dracori. He’s not the wolf shifter who originally apprehended me—he’s much meaner. The wagon shakes hard when he hops off the driver’s bench, as if he’d intentionally jostled it.

I don’t reply. His lip curls with disgust. He’s one of those people who love riling others up just to see their reactions. It’s too bad for him I’m not in a giving mood right now.

He glares at me while I struggle to get off the wagon with my bound hands. I want to snark at him, but the numbness keeps me quiet. What does it matter, anyway? Better to keep from making things worse for myself as he leads me into a Dracori station painted in royal red and gold. On the aging wooden building, the red is more ruddy and the gold resembles a pale

yellow instead of luxurious metal. I like it better this way; these signs of desuetude more closely reflect the king's neglect of his own people.

I'm allowed a moment of privacy to use the toilet, though I suppose there are no bathing privileges for prisoners.

Prisoners.

The word repeats in my mind as I stare into the scratched mirror at my cracked lips and pale face. My dark-brown eyes and the even darker circles beneath them. I've looked worse—especially in my early days fighting for Spencer, when I couldn't afford to pay for healing after getting completely pummelled—but somehow, the reflection peering back at me is my worst one yet.

It must be the gaunt, hollow gaze.

The look of pure despair. Of absolute hopelessness. Of being lost with no way home and knowing home likely doesn't even exist anymore.

The water from the faucet is loud, but not nearly enough to stifle the sobs threatening to choke me from the inside out.

I take deep, gasping breaths, one after another.

In. Out.

In. Out.

Again.

Again.

I force myself to count until the crippling sorrow isn't so crippling. Until I know I can look at my reflection without feeling like I can't breathe.

Only then do I realize my hands are gripping the edges of the sink so tightly it hurts to let go. Releasing a ragged gasp, I peel my fingers from the porcelain and run them in the water, hoping the coolness will soothe them. It doesn't, but at least it's something different from the maelstrom writhing inside of me.

The Dracori gives me a dirty look as I close the door behind me. His eyes dip to where the disconnected silencing cuffs hang loosely on each wrist.

I offer my hands, but he roughly grabs one of the loops, yanking it toward him as he connects it to the chain. He jerks it. I stumble. He smirks while connecting the other end to the cuff on my right wrist, locking my hands once more.

He gives the chain another quick pull. I stumble again. Still, I say nothing.

“Stay on your feet, won’t you?” he sneers.

I might feel a little better after having splashed my face with water, but I won’t give him the satisfaction of a response.

He looks into my eyes, and I know what he sees there. I saw it earlier in the mirror.

When he pushes me back to the front of the Dracori station, I almost turn and ask him where he’s taking me. Thankfully, other Dracori walk past us in the hallway, and I dip my head at their curious gazes. I don’t need to give anyone the satisfaction of knowing I don’t understand what’s happening.

I’m led back to the wagon, and I make sure to keep the sound of my struggles silent, because I know the Dracori is waiting to laugh as I work to get on my seat with my hands bound so tightly.

There isn’t a town jail in Grengrove—we don’t even have a station to house our own Dracori—so prisoners are taken to the next town for holding. Which is where I thought they were taking me. But as I situate myself once more on the uncomfortably hard bench, I settle into the realization that’s not at all what’s happening here. Instead, the Dracori grunts, gesturing for me to move over. I furrow my brow in confusion, but make space at his insistence.

Another Dracori exits the building, and I suddenly understand. Though she’s dressed in the same garb as the others, she has the look of a person who’s been through more than someone her age should have experienced. Barely older than me, she drags six others behind her—four women and two men—variously dressed, with their wrists shackled just like mine. Though, I’m sure the silence stones actually do something to them, silencing their shifting powers along with access to their animal’s abilities.

Four other Dracori bring up the rear until everyone stands in a straight line before the wagon. Someone reads names from a parchment clipped to a board, making marks as each person mumbles their confirmation.

I squint against the brightness of the quickly rising sun to see the other prisoners, but it only causes the beginning of a headache, so I decide it’s not worth it. I’ve barely dropped my head when a female Dracori barks something.

“This isn’t what we talked about, Stan,” growls the woman. Her brown hair is tied into a high tail at the back of her head. She takes the clipboard

and pushes it into the face of the Dracori who brought me here—Stan, apparently. “Do you see this list? Do you?”

It shouldn’t give me pleasure to see the mean driver scolded, but I feel no guilt when he pales before the might of the brunette, whose decorated red jacket must mean she’s of a higher rank than Stan.

“How many people does this show?” she asks.

“Seven,” he answers, throat bobbing.

“And how many people does this wagon fit?” She jerks a thumb behind her, pointing to me.

“Four,” Stan mutters.

“So how do you expect this to work?” The brunette pushes the clipboard in Stan’s face again, and I nearly writhe with glee.

“I—I’ll go get the caravan.” Stan speeds away without looking back.

“Unfit for anything, skies curse him,” she mutters.

I openly crane my neck, watching as he hurries around the corner of the building, hoping he’ll trip and fall.

Someone clears their throat. I glance back to see the woman watching me. Warmth flushes my cheeks; for a moment, I forgot where I am. What I am. The metal links of my cuffs remind me, along with the Dracori’s sharp, shrewd eyes.

My jaw slackens in shock when one of her eyebrows lifts with the corner of her lips, the movement nearly imperceptible. She makes eye contact for only a moment—as if to lament the incompetence of others—before turning and barking orders at the others.

“Help the prisoner”—she looks at her clipboard—“Scarlet down from the wagon. You saw what happens when you treat people the way Stan does. When you don’t think the way Stan does not. Don’t be like Stan.”

“Yes, Shira,” the remaining Dracori answer in unison.

“Olivia, Caleb, Jules, Erin.” Shira jerks her head one way, but I don’t see what happens next.

Someone grabs my elbow firmly, though not roughly, and helps me down. As soon as my feet hit the solid ground, they back away, putting distance between us.

Shira gives me a sidelong glance, and I quickly join the line with the other prisoners. Any camaraderie I might have sensed has evidently dissolved.

The rumble of wheels on the dirt path draws my attention as Stan returns with a caravan significantly larger than the wagon. It also has a roof, which makes me worry. How far are we to travel?

The other Dracori get to work inspecting the pair of horses at the lead, as well as the wheels. I turn to Shira, but she speaks first.

“You have all been apprehended for your crimes against Selerune.” There’s only stony seriousness in her eyes as she looks each of us over. “You will be taken to the castle to face your judgement there.”

“Oh,” I gasp.

The prisoner at my side barely shifts, as if she’d expected this. If anyone else was aware, they keep their surprise to themselves.

“I thought—” The words are stuck in my throat. I swallow, but nothing more comes out. Those accused of crimes always get the chance to stand trial before the Dracori appointed to hear appeals. I don’t know the exact process, but I had assumed I was being taken to the local holding cells and would spend some time imprisoned before getting to explain the accusations against me. But if I’m being taken straight to the castle…

Shira glances at me, her face softening. “This is just because of a recent rise in Rebel activity. The king wants a Dracori Knight to see each criminal, just as a precaution. This doesn’t mean you will be condemned for sure.”

My brows furrow. Grengrove is small enough that sometimes, news from the crown can take longer to reach us, if it gets to us at all. Usually, only cities and bigger towns are guaranteed to receive the latest announcements, because they are deemed higher priority; I hadn’t realized the Dracori were taking prisoners right to the castle in Seluria—the capital of Selerune.

I balk at the thought of meeting a Dracori Knight. Aside from the King’s Three, the Knights make up Selerune’s highest ranking guards. As such, Shira’s words mean I’ll be standing trial to some of the most powerful shifters of the kingdom.

What would be worse? Pleading my case to a Knight or being condemned by one?

I exhale. Condemnation for someone like me would be the worst punishment. Depending on the crime, condemned shifters get sent to the front lines of the fight against Rebels. Battle would be a blessing for the condemned shiftless; without powers of our own, the shiftless are sold as servants, sometimes for decades before earning their freedom again.

At best, I’m sentenced only to endure time in the castle’s dungeons.

At worst, I’m condemned to being someone’s servant—for who knows how long.

I can’t live under someone else’s control again. I can’t.

I’d rather risk my life hunting Rebels than to give my life to another person once more.

The clink of my metal bindings tells me I have no choice in the matter. I lengthen my breaths and chase away the weight threatening to smother me as I take a seat on the wooden bench and rest against the wall. The immediate, physical relief to my lower back does little to distract my mind while the heavy canvas tarpaulin roof of the caravan blocks the sun, shrouding me in shadows nearly as dark as the ones drifting over my thoughts.

For a ridiculous, fleeting moment, I wonder if there’s a chance I might escape the Dracori—maybe I could survive as a fugitive—even though the caravan is made of mostly wood and metal. I hope the guards unlatch the small, wooden panels on either side of the walls; though both are too small to even fit my head through, I already ache for fresh air.

The floor shakes as another prisoner climbs on, taking the seat next to me. I turn my gaze down, staring at the variation of boots compared to my own run-down shoes while the others join the first and settle onto my bench as well as the one across from me. Suddenly, the caravan feels far too crowded. Any absurd thoughts of running away vanish as quickly as they had appeared, and though I know no one is tightening the iron loops on my wrists, I can’t help but feel as if I’m moments from suffocating.

I focus on the striations of the wooden floorboards instead of my shortening breaths, kicking at a dent with the toe of my boot. A shiver climbs up my spine when the caravan door bangs shut. I drop my hands into my lap, trying to avoid thinking the click of the lock was my fate being sealed.

Sounds of the Dracori preparing the caravan for departure mix with my fears until all I can do is steady my breathing. Then, gravel crunches beneath the turning wheels, and the vehicle sways. I clench my fists tighter until the sting of nails against my palm brings me back to the present.

Shoes shuffle. Someone grunts.

“Well, aren’t we just a merry band of Rebels?” asks a masculine voice.

My head snaps up, my gaze landing immediately on the blond sitting across from me. Despite the lack of light darkening the blue of his eyes, they glimmer with amusement. Irritation flashes through me; what is so amusing about our predicament?

But then my mind finally processes what he's said. If I weren't already filled to the brim with dread, my mouth might have dropped open at his brazen accusation. What makes him think I'm a Rebel? If anyone believes him—if a Dracori hears—I'll have no chance at my trial. If I even get one at all.

I keep my questions to myself, because I don't want to cause more trouble. But his eyes catch mine, and he grins. I barely keep my eyes from narrowing before looking away.

"Don't say that," hisses one woman. "Don't even joke about things like that."

"You know Wickham's an idiot. It's probably his loud mouth that got us here in the first place," sneers the man at the blond's side. His slicked, dark-brown hair doesn't move an inch as he drops his head against the caravan door to peer at the rest of us. I avert my gaze. He's massive, resembling a wall of muscle typical of bear shifters. In my experience, bear shifters are either very kind or very…not.

"I'm just trying to help the situation," says the one called Wickham, lifting his bound hands in the air in placation. "Make the best of what we've got, right?"

The lady across the bear shifter hums as she leans forward in her seat on the other end of my bench. She looks young, reminding me of Anica; the thought adds another knot to my twisted stomach. Despite trying to harden my heart against their abandonment, I can't help but hope none of them are wearing silence stones.

"He's right. What do we have if not for our humour and our spirits?" asks the young woman, tilting her head. Light streaks through the cracks of the caravan walls, shining onto the hair falling over her shoulders. What I had thought was brown hair is actually dark red.

The bear shifter snorts. "We're caught. There's no future for you and Wickham. You can stop hanging onto his every word."

I hold my breath in wait for her response to the palpable disdain in his voice. At least three of the prisoners seem to know each other, which means

I’m the odd one out. Even if the cuffs silence their shifter magic, I’m still outnumbered.

“Wickham’s in the wrong, but that doesn’t mean you can be mean just for the sake of being mean, Kieran. We’re all stuck in this awful situation, and it doesn’t matter whose fault it is.” The woman sitting two down from me is the one who speaks, but it makes the one at my side tense.

“Tera,” she whispers. Under the quiver in her tone is the exasperation of a sister of a sibling beyond reproach. I would have smiled to myself if it weren’t for Kieran’s deep-throated growl.

“What?” Tera turns, and I realize she and the woman sitting between us are more than sisters—they’re twins. Though, the way they carry themselves would have had me convinced otherwise. “Kieran is being vile for absolutely no reason, and I won’t have it.”

“And what are you going to do about it?” Kieran’s lip curls, baring his teeth in a vicious smile. “We’re silenced, which means you can’t even fly away from me like the useless little bird that you are.”

“We’re locked in here. We’re prisoners,” Tera says blankly. “None of us can go anywhere.”

A small giggle escapes me before I can stop it. Slapping a hand over my mouth only draws more attention as the clinking of my chain makes me jump.

Kieran glares at me, but he seems to think I’m not worth the effort, because he slumps back in his seat, rolling his head against the wall and closing his eyes.

“And who do we have here?” Wickham raises a blonde brow. “What did you do to get yourself landed here?”

“You can’t just ask things like that,” says the woman at my side—Tera’s twin—before she shuffles to turn and face me. “You don’t have to answer him.”

“Oh. I—er.” I clear my throat. “Thank you.”

“I’m Shelley.” She shifts again, lifting both hands to point at Tera behind her. “That’s my twin, Tera.”

Kieran groans from his corner of the caravan without sitting up to look at us. “It’s obvious you’re twins, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?” Tera’s voice rises as Shelley turns back to her sister, placing a hand on her twin’s arm. “Just what are you trying to say?”

“I suppose it makes sense your sister is used to stating the obvious, if you can’t even understand what I’m saying.” His eyes remain closed, his head still resting against the wall.

“Ignore him,” Shelley says, pulling at Tera’s sleeve. “Just ignore him.”

I wince at the way Shelley’s voice quiets, sounding frailer than she looks. Tera, on the other hand, gets angrier the more her sister shrinks.

The sounds of their squabbling fade as I stare once more at the dented floorboards. I wish I were back on the wagon. Even though I had only the Dracori’s jeers for company, at least I was alone.

I still don’t know if Wickham was joking about being a Rebel.

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CHAPTER

SEVEN

Wickham smiles. “I suppose I’ll start, then. I’m Wickham. This here is Kieran.” He nudges the bear shifter with his shoulder, barely getting a grunt in return. “We’re not Rebels.”

Everyone, including the silent woman sitting on his other side, tenses at the word.

“Neither are Hartley, Tera, nor Shelley.” Wickham points at the women sharing my bench. Then he jerks a thumb beside him. “Mariette’s not either, but she doesn’t say much, so who knows? You know how panthers are.”

I don’t know, but I’m not about to tell him as much.

Mariette rolls her green eyes and lifts her arms before dropping them again, her hands flexing in her lap as if frustrated she’d forgotten she can’t cross her arms at Wickham’s antics. Her chestnut hair, tied into two small tails sticking up at the top of her head—the bottom pieces, too short to be tied, stay loose at her nape—contrasts against the dark wood of the caravan as she rests her head on the wall instead of responding.

Wickham grins. “See?”

Tera sighs, but the redhead named Hartley laughs; the forced, high sound grates my ears, and I almost understand Kieran’s need to be so mean.

“We’re all here because we—unfortunately—got caught stealing ancient relics.” Wickham shrugs, but the others stiffen once more at the blond’s casual confession. Even Mariette stops tapping her foot. “Not that we’ll admit anything to the Dracori, of course.” He winks.

Something flutters in my stomach even as alarm bells peal loudly in my head. I’m not used to receiving any attention, much less anything even remotely passable as flirting. As sad as it sounds, next to Old Gary, Gerard

was the closest relationship I've had in years—in my entire adult life—and I'd never dared to hope for more than friendship. No one wants to associate with the shiftless, and it doesn't help that many find my physical abilities discomforting.

Shifters can get their first shift as early as ten years old, though most experience it around fifteen, meaning they spend only a small portion of their lives without magic; it's as much an extension of themselves as their four limbs. Even those who receive formal training—like Spencer's guards or, from what little I've seen, some of the Dracori—rely on their shifter magic more than what their human bodies can do, whereas my human body is all I have.

I dismiss the unease and return Wickham's smile, though the flicker of uncertainty in his eyes makes me think I might have resembled Kieran more than a charmed lady.

"What were the relics?" I ask, changing the topic. I don't have to feign interest; even though I know it's probably not in my best interest to know more about thieves, I can't help the curiosity. Everyone knows King Waylon has an obsession with magical items, though no one seems to know what he does with them. "Were you…stealing directly from the king?"

Mariette hits the back of her head against the wall once, but otherwise stays silent. A pang of guilt hits me, because Shelley breathes in sharply at my question, her hands fidgeting in her lap.

Kieran snorts, eyes still closed as he shakes his head. "If we'd stolen from the king himself, do you think we'd be here? I mean *here*, as in still alive?"

"No, not King Waylon himself." Wickham's smile is kind, and it does something to my stomach. Something I don't entirely like. When he leans in, though, I do the same. He whispers, "But it was a cache of recovered artifacts, which *did* include weapons."

"Unfortunately for us," Tera says with bitterness, "no one knew about the weapons, and our ambush was turned against us."

Shelley shakes her head with a sigh. "We didn't know there were going to be so many Dracori. There were only supposed to be a few."

"We live and learn." Wickham leans back into his seat, shrugging. "Next time, we'll be sure to ask our sources specifically about weapons."

I blink at the blond's utter disregard. "But what about—what about getting caught?"

“Exactly,” Tera says with a huff. “There might not be a next time.”

“There’s always a next time!” Wickham waves his hand, though both hands end up in the air. “Besides, clever Shelley here got away with something they didn’t catch, didn’t you?”

Shelley sighs as all eyes turn to her, though I notice Hartley hasn’t stopped bristling the entire time Wickham’s attention has been on everyone else.

Tera reaches out to hold her sister’s hand. After a moment of hesitation, the more timid twin nods. Hartley seems incapable of keeping her face from twisting into anger at the tiny motion of admission.

“I swallowed a small amulet,” Shelley says, her cheeks flushing so deep it’s visible even in the caravan. She catches my eye and quickly adds, “But it’s not a huge feat or anything. It truly was very small.”

Shelley pinches her thumb and forefinger together to indicate its size.

“Anything is good if it means we can keep it out of the king’s hands while adding more money to our pockets.” Kieran finally opens his eyes, though he still appears determined to look down his nose at us.

“Careful, Kieran. Or you might start sounding like an actual Rebel.” Wickham’s grin is the brightest thing in the caravan, even when slivers of the sun slip through the cracks of the wooden walls.

We pass the time to Seluria in a mix of silence and chatter, the caravan stopping only once when the Dracori decide we are allowed to use the bathroom before giving us each a heel of stale bread, a hunk of cheese, and a piece of fruit. While the others gobbled every morsel of the meagre meal, I couldn’t stop myself from tucking half my bread into the pocket of my pants. The Dracori took everything I had on me before we left Grengrove, and the thought of going hungry makes me nervous enough to risk rationing my food.

Most of the day’s conversation was between Wickham, Tera, Shelley, and Hartley—with the occasional comment from Kieran—but I’m unused to the consistency of it, and by the time true darkness takes over the caravan, I’m so exhausted I might actually sleep despite the anticipation writhing through my mind.

“I’m so thirsty,” Hartley whines for what feels like the tenth time since the sun has set. “Can’t they give us some water?”

“They don’t want us needing to use the bathroom more often than necessary,” Shelley replies calmly.

“That’s a good idea,” Kieran says, interrupting Hartley’s answering groan. “You don’t think they’ll make us piss ourselves in here, do you?”

In the darkness, I can’t see who the bear shifter asks, but Wickham says, “Surely not.”

Mariette snorts softly—or is it my imagination?

“All right, then.”

I’m about to ask what he means when a loud thumping cracks through the caravan, the reverberations so heavy they travel through the soles of my feet and up my spine through the bench.

“I need to pee!” Kieran shouts, the clanging of his metal cuffs adding to his fist pounding hard against the walls of our moving prison.

“Hey! Hey!” The bear shifter’s deep voice sends a chill racing through me. I clutch the bottom of the wooden bench to steady myself as the caravan screeches to a halt.

Someone throws the door open with loud cursing as the Dracori demand to know what the ruckus is all about. I squint against the light from their lanterns after spending so long in darkness.

“I said I need to pee,” Kieran declares loudly.

Between the flames of their lanterns and the moonlight, my eyes eventually adjust. Two Dracori grumble as they help Kieran out of the caravan, though I can’t make out their features. The shadows of two more lurk behind them.

“Anyone else?” asks a female Dracori. “We’re trying to get to the castle before daybreak, so do what you need. Because we’re not stopping again.”

Her partner, a male guard, lifts the light to his face as he yawns, rubbing his eyes and mumbling, “Skies damn you for interrupting my sleep. I just had a long shift of driving.”

Another moment of insanity nearly overtakes me as I consider the possibility of escape once more. It’s dark, and at least one guard is still half asleep, which works in my favour. Unfortunately, only shifters are allowed to be Dracori, meaning they’ll be able to see better than I can. If they catch me, they’ll surely kill me on the spot.

My fingers twitch as part of me wants to take that chance.

But the woman starts closing the door.

“Wait!” Wickham’s sharp cry makes me jump. “Miss Olivia, was it?”

The creaking stops. She tilts her head without any indication of answering.

“Can we leave it open?” Wickham’s voice is as sweet as sweetmallow, and I can almost see his charming smile. “Just until Kieran gets back. It gets stuffy in here.”

The silhouette of his hand waves in front of his face.

The woman sighs so deeply, she’s likely rolling her eyes.

Her partner rocks on his feet. “What will it hurt, Olivia? You’ll be here.”

“I’ll be here?” She’s surely rolling her eyes now.

“Yeah. Jules and Caleb are with the other one. I’ve gotta get some more sleep before my next shift, since apparently someone shouldn’t be driving at night.” He yawns again. “You’ve got this handled.”

“Whatever.” She grumbles something about Erin’s laziness, dismissing the other Dracori. Turning to us, she brings her lantern up to her face as she allows her magic to whirl. She shifts just enough for the ghost of her bear to take over, her expression turning a little wild and her teeth growing long and pointed. Her voice is gravelly as her bear’s jaw moves clumsily over her human face to form the words. “Move and regret it.”

A shiver rushes down my back at such precise, adept shifting; Olivia is a skilled shifter. I sigh internally. Even though this might be my best chance for escape, especially when there’s only one Dracori guarding us, the risk is still too high. My insides twist with indecision and uncertainty as I settle back onto the uncomfortable bench and close my eyes, secretly appreciating Wickham’s brazen request for fresh air as I try to remember the names Shira had uttered this morning when we were loaded onto the caravan.

“We’ve got nothing but the clothes on our backs and the cuffs silencing our powers,” Wickham says cheerfully. Olivia grunts.

I inhale a lungful of air; the breeze brings with it the scent of grass, trees, and what I’ve always associated with the time of night when the moon paints the land with peace.

If I pretend hard enough, I can almost imagine I’m sitting in my cabin. The cabin I grew up in. The cabin my siblings left me in when they abandoned me. The home I can barely afford to maintain, but the only home I’ve ever known, nonetheless.

A home I might one day return to.

A growling interrupts my thoughts, so I squeeze my eyes tighter, trying to return to that space between consciousness and unconsciousness, where I'm just drowsy enough to dream, but still aware enough for them to feel real.

Then the growls turn guttural.

Something heavy slams into the caravan.

My eyes fly open as I'm rocked off the bench. Rising to my feet, I widen my stance for balance.

Everyone else is standing, as well.

Olivia is nowhere to be seen.

Wickham's silhouette takes up most of the door, with Hartley peering out at his side. Tera and Shelley hold each other, though Tera has positioned herself in front of her sister.

What little light leaking through the open door makes it possible to see Mariette glancing at me—no, not at me. At the wooden window just off to my side, between the twins. I look at the one above where Wickham was sitting.

She and I make eye contact. Without words, we each reach for our respective panels, heart racing as my mind invents a Rebel attack or maybe even mercenaries. Kieran looks the type to have many enemies. Or maybe Wickham; his smile is a touch too slick.

Shelley doesn't look at me as she shuffles to the side, making space when I shoulder my way past her. Tera huffs, but she says nothing as well, her attention wholly focused on the open door.

The window is the inexpensive kind; it is only a wooden panel held in place with metal hinges and a latch. With my hands bound, it's difficult to unlock, but I make do by slamming my elbow on the other end of the panel while twisting the latch. Fresh air greets me.

Along with the sound of struggle.

I bite my lip. The window is almost big enough for me to climb through if I wanted to dislocate a shoulder, but only if the panel were removed; as it is right now, it only opens to a certain angle.

I poke my head out and peer as far as I dare, holding my breath in a mix of fear and hope. Maybe it's not an attack on us—maybe it's an attack on the Dracori. Is it Kieran? Could he have had the same mad idea to escape, and now he's coming back for us?

As big as he is, there's only one of him against the two Dracori who escorted him to relieve himself.

Not to mention the Silence on his shifting.

And I hear stifled growls, which means at least one Dracori has shifted. The odds are against Kieran. Could he have defeated two Dracori on his own?

When I see nothing more than the moonlit grass, I strain to peer out further. But with the panel still on, I can't change my angle enough, so I retreat into the caravan. It's not worth the time and effort to remove the panel when the door is still open.

Tera and Shelley have inched forward to look over Wickham's other shoulder, while the blond himself hangs one foot out the door as if debating whether he should hop out.

Mariette curses.

Before I can ask, I catch sight of her eyes wide with fear. Then she launches away from the window—from the entire wall.

Without hesitation, I follow and throw myself toward the door.

We brush past the twins and slam into Wickham.

At least four of us fall out of the caravan in a tangle of limbs as a crash booms behind us in an explosion of splintering wood and creaking metal.

I land heavily on my hip. Someone collides with my shoulder, their full weight twisting until my elbow drops hard against the ground.

Hartley shrieks. Something that feels suspiciously like a foot digs into my calf.

We all freeze at the sound of something ripping.

Because it's not the sound of *cloth* ripping…

A painful scream fills the night, spurring us into action. In an astounding display of efficiency, we manage to push away from each other, all rising within seconds to witness the horrific scenes playing out in front of our eyes. So much is happening, I don't know where to look first.

Far enough from us to have muffled most of the sounds of fighting is the male Dracori, spear in hand, standing next to a colossal bear. Two wolves and a man surround them.

The bear must be Olivia, because she and Erin seem to work in tandem. He keeps the wolves at bay while she charges at any opening. The man draws two swords, shifter magic swirling down both arms.

I blink. Everyone appears to have their limbs. So where…

A large grey wolf shakes her head next to the remnants of the caravan's side. The wall Mariette had sprung from is in tatters, the wooden boards broken into pieces and splayed out around the wolf. The horses are nowhere to be found, and at the other end, by the barely intact entrance, Tera screams as she struggles to remove the debris pinning her sister from the hips down.

My feet move before my mind catches up to what I'm doing. All I know is Shelley—quiet, soft-spoken Shelley—needs help.

But a loud bellow stops me in my tracks. Tera is still screaming. Shelley sobs.

I'm afraid to turn, afraid of what I might see.

But a deep scream forces me to look.

In the distance, Kieran bursts through the forest's edge, sprinting with his bound hands in front of him, eyes wide and wild. A Dracori races after him, wielding a sword. My confused mind thinks at first Kieran must have escaped the guard's clutches, but I quickly realize Caleb isn't running after the bear shifter. They're both running…from a pair of wolves.

Two massive brown wolves come flying out of the woods, jaws snapping at the heels of Kieran and Caleb.

A third wolf bounds through the trees, slower than the others. I nearly retch at the sight of the arm in her mouth—the arm that isn't attached to a person.

The soiled red and gold sleeve tells me Jules is not likely to survive the night, wherever the rest of her might be.

Kieran shouts something.

Caleb shouts something back, pointing at Olivia and Erin.

Neither slows their pace, but Caleb continues racing toward the remaining Dracori while Kieran pivots, turning to us. Are the wolves with Kieran and Wickham? Are they here to rescue us?

A low growl snaps my attention back to the grey wolf who now stands before the twins, her furry back facing us as her long tail sweeps behind her. My mouth dries.

Tera's stopped screaming, but Shelley whimpers.

"Hey!" Wickham shouts, his eyes solely on the sisters as the wolf's glowing red eyes slide to him without turning her head. "Why don't you pick on someone your own size?"

The wolves aren't with the thieves, then. Even colder fear clutches my heart as Wickham continues to taunt the wolf, waving his bound hands. The

massive beast blinks, jaw opening slightly. Is she assessing his idiocy or is that the haze of madness in her eyes?

A cry of anguish and pain rips through the air, followed by more sounds of fighting. In my periphery, four humans stand, though I don't dare turn to check who remains.

I can't face another shifter—I doubt I'd get lucky again—but if I can take advantage of the chaos and slip away…

What about Shelley? Can I leave her here like this? Pinned to the ground and vulnerable to whoever comes out on top?

Suddenly, an enormous mass rises from behind the wolf, releasing a roar I feel in my bones and shutting all reason from my mind.

The black-brown bear drops to all fours; the ground beneath my feet rumbles from the weight.

I swallow when I see the shackles lying on the ground next to a ring of keys.

It's Kieran.

Kieran must have freed his bindings and shifted while Wickham distracted the wolf.

The wolf doesn't wait; she launches herself at Kieran, who easily bats her away with a thick paw. Wickham's blond head bobs as he leaps to the side, diving for the keys.

In the distance, someone shrieks with pain.

"Help her!" Wickham shouts.

I gasp and nod, remembering I'm not rooted to the spot. Turning, I find Tera, wide-eyed and frozen, hand still clutching a wooden plank on top of the debris on her sister.

"Go!" I wave her away as I grab the item closest to me and toss it aside. "I've got this. Get the keys for us!"

Shelley moans softly. I shove Tera with my shoulder.

Finally, blinking back tears, Tera's dark-blonde braid swings as she turns, giving Kieran and the wolf a wide berth as she makes her way to Wickham.

"It's okay," I say in a rough voice. "It's going to be okay."

I'm not sure I believe myself, because removing some of the wooden debris reveals a thick metal pillar still connected to the broken caravan, along with several metal poles, all trapping Shelley beneath their weight. Her fearful eyes lift, glassy with unshed tears. I force my expression back to

neutral and wipe my eyes with the back of my hand, steadying my breathing and tightening my core. I wrap my fingers around the end of the pillar, lower my centre of gravity, and push my heels into the ground. My legs quake with the effort and my arms strain from the weight, but finally—finally—the caravan groans, lifting slightly from the twin.

Not enough to free her entirely, but enough that she can shimmy.

Shelley sobs as she claws her way out from beneath the rubble, elbows dragging her body at an excruciatingly slow pace. I exhale and adjust my position. Sweat lines my neck, and my back weakens with every inch I gain.

My fingers are turning numb.

My shoulders ache.

My legs burn.

I push aside the image of the entire caravan dropping right back onto Shelley.

I will away the mere thought of failing.

With a grunt, I dig my heels deeper into the ground and pray she moves faster.

But my vision darkens.

Just as I think my body might give, the weight lessens.

Wickham appears at my side, arms swirling with tendrils of silvery shifter magic. Shackles nowhere to be seen.

“Shelley!” Tera cries, dropping to her knees and pawing at the broken wooden planks still covering her twin’s legs.

“Drag her out,” Wickham says through clenched teeth. His neck bulges with the effort. Even with both of us, the weight is overwhelming.

Kieran growls. The wolf whimpers.

Then she howls.

The sound freezes the blood in my veins, because I may not know much about wolves, but I know a cry for backup when I hear it—and this one is loud enough to echo through the night, calling for more to join the fray.

“NOW!” Wickham roars.

Tera takes Shelley by the arms and yanks her sobbing sister, pulling and dragging and kicking dirt and clumps of grass until finally, Shelley rolls out from beneath the caravan.

As one, Wickham and I release the pillar. I gasp and gulp for air but can’t seem to get enough.

“Here,” he says between pants. “Unlock.”

Still panting for relief, I lift my wrists as high as they will go. He pulls the ring of keys from his pocket with shaky hands, nearly dropping them twice before releasing me from my bindings.

“Thank…you,” I mutter.

Wickham tosses me a weak grin. His gaze connects with mine, then he glances behind me as he says, “We should…get out…of here.”

I nod, struggling to my feet. Tera helps her sister stand; I suspect her leg might be broken. They don’t look back at Kieran, who has nearly pinned the wolf on his own, as Wickham removes the cuffs from Shelley, too.

“Can you fly?” Tera asks.

Shelley’s white face pales even further as she closes her eyes for only one moment before exhaling hard and shaking her head.

Her twin clenches her jaw. She looks at Wickham, but his eyes are scanning the woods ahead of us.

I tilt my head at Tera and tuck my shoulder under Shelley’s other arm as I cast a quick glance past Kieran. I don’t want to look back at the Dracori and the remaining shifters, but I have to know how many might come after us, and whether they’re the king’s people or these wolves.

“Why are they—*who* are they?” I pant as the four of us hobble our way toward the very woods Kieran had sprinted from. Adrenaline keeps pain and fatigue at bay, but the exhaustion is bone deep, and I can barely keep up even with Shelley’s limping gait.

Wickham notices when I stumble. Wordlessly, he moves to take Shelley from me. He and Tera both tap into their shifter stamina, their legs glowing with the tendrils of magic.

“Don’t know,” Wickham grunts. “Maybe just enemies of the crown.”

I don’t ask more questions, because it takes all of my energy just to stay with their pace, and I cannot get left behind.

Alone in the dark, in the woods, and with shifters looking for me, I might as well turn myself in at the nearest Dracori station. Having Wickham and Tera at my side gives me a fighting chance; their animal senses will catch the danger and risks I would miss on my own.

If they don’t abandon me.

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CHAPTER

EIGHT

We stumble through the woods, ducking low-hanging branches and avoiding thick roots on the ground through the slivers of moonlight that make it through the thick forest foliage.

I gasp. Something slams into my back, knocking the breath out of me. I drop to my hands and knees and wince as loose gravel digs into my palms. Grunting and looking behind me, I push up to my feet. The wolf who hit me is already gone, joined by another as both turn their focus wholly on Tera, who shrieks as a third clamps vicious teeth on Shelley, dragging the struggling, pale twin toward the bushes.

My heart hammers in my ears. Silver-white shifter magic swirl all around Tera and Wickham as they prepare to fight. Tera's eyes flick from the wolves before them to where her sister's shouts have turned into quiet whimpers.

I could make my escape now. I could get away. Even without a shifter's senses, I might still have a better chance of surviving on my own than I do here with the thieves, where I have no idea why wolf shifters have attacked our group of prisoners.

Where no one is looking my way.

Where no one is paying attention to what I'm doing.

But Shelley has stopped struggling, blood darkening the leg of her pants as the wolf drags her limp body farther from her twin.

Tera and Wickham shout as the wolves make their first move.

There's no one left to help Shelley. No one but me.

But I don't have shifter magic. I don't have an animal's enhanced abilities.

Shelley’s legs disappear into the darkness.

Tera sobs, her fists clenched tightly at her side, arms swirling with silver strands as the wolves circle her and Wickham.

Wickham shouts, “Get her!”

I clench my jaw and exhale, placing one foot in front of the other.

Faster, faster.

Until I’m racing into the shadows.

Racing for Shelley.

In the darkness, I can just barely make out the trail of blood. Branches scrape my skin even though I’m already running at a slower pace than my frantic heart urges. The light of the quarter-moon barely penetrates the thicket, though I’m sure I haven’t gone far from the others.

The trail of blood grows. So does the lump in my throat.

I force my breaths to slow when I hear the distinct sound of snuffling. My stomach drops, but I keep going even as my legs grow heavier with each step.

Left foot. Inhale.

Right foot. Exhale.

I continue until I reach a spot where the treetops aren’t as thick. Clouds disperse, revealing a beam of moonlight shining onto the wolf crouched over Shelley, who lies motionless on her side.

She doesn’t scream—doesn’t even whimper—as the wolf pushes her onto her back. Shelley’s arms flop uselessly onto the grass, and I swallow rising nausea when I realize the wolf digs her snout into poor Shelley’s open stomach.

Fury crashes into me in waves, melting my ice-cold veins and boiling my blood instead. What sort of shifter does this to one of their own? Who does this wolf think she is?

I grab a nearby branch, wrapping both hands around it and wielding it as a makeshift weapon.

“Hey!” I holler.

The wolf’s ears twitch my way, but she only casts a mildly annoyed glance at me before returning to her meal. My stomach roils. My tongue

feels like sandpaper. I'm not entirely sure what I will do, but I'm certain I must do something. I'm Shelley's only hope. I know what it's like to be abandoned, and I can't abandon her. I won't.

Taking a deep breath through clenched teeth, I lift the branch and stalk quietly toward the wolf; she's too engrossed to even notice. When I'm close enough, I run the last few steps, swinging the thick branch with all my might. It doesn't move as quickly as I expected, but it's enough for the wolf to spring from Shelley.

The wolf growls, her lips wrinkling as she pins me with her glare. It's only under the light of the moon that I realize her eyes aren't black—they're dark red.

She lunges for me, mouth open and aimed for my neck. I barely step out of the way, the branch lifted between us in defence.

The bark snaps like a twig in her powerful jaws.

I grit my teeth and pull both ends of the branch to my sides, wielding them like dual short swords instead.

I only have to hold this mad wolf off until someone gets to us. Whether it's Tera and Wickham or Kieran—or even the Dracori—at least I will have the assistance of shifters. And at least Shelley might survive.

The wolf shakes her head. Silver-white tendrils race all around her body, and if I weren't so scared, I might have felt a little insulted; shifters are vulnerable when they change forms, and her willingness to risk it in front of me only shows how little of a threat she considers me.

I lunge for her, but she shifts faster than I expect; back in her human form, she raises both arms and blocks my branches. I dive to the side before she can retaliate.

Her grin is maniacal—exactly what I would expect from someone who cannibalizes her own kind—and she flexes her hands.

"I can smell the fear all over you," she says with a sharp laugh. The brightness of her red eyes fades into brown. "I won't even need my wolf for this."

I grip the branches tighter. The bark digs into my shredded palms, the sting of the pain grounding me through the fear as my taut muscles wait.

"You'll want your wolf for this," growls a deep, barely human voice.

Kieran walks into the light, and I have never in my life been so glad to see a bear shifter.

Instead of responding, she snarls. Silver magic swirls around her once again as she recognizes the threat of her opponent. Kieran responds in kind.

I step closer to the mountain of a thief—does he know how fast she shifts?—but I should have known better. They're nearly matched in speed, with Kieran's bear form roaring just a heartbeat before the wolf returns.

As they keep each other busy, I race for Shelley, branches forgotten when I drop to my knees before her broken body.

"Shelley," I croak. "Shelley."

But she doesn't open her eyes. She's so still, and there's so much blood. And her stomach…

Skies, I can't even look. Tears blur my vision as I force myself to see—in case she's still breathing. In case there's anything I can do to help.

A small whimper escapes her lips, so quiet I barely hear it.

"Shelley," I whisper again, the tears falling freely now. She must be in so much pain. "Shelley, please stay with me. We'll get you help. Skies, help is coming."

I'm afraid to touch her.

Afraid I might hurt her.

I wipe at the tears streaming down my face.

I have to stop crying. I have to stop crying.

Her eyes are glassy and unseeing, but they turn to my voice.

"You're not alone, Shelley," I repeat, the words breaking with my voice. "You're not alone. I'm here, Shelley. I'm here with you. I'll stay with you."

Skies, there's so much blood. I don't dare look away from her, even with the roaring and growling and guttural, feral sounds of fighting, in case she slips from me while my gaze is elsewhere.

I sniffle, dragging my sleeve over my nose and swallowing as I blink the tears away as if studying her broken body might fix something. How do I even begin to close a wound like this? Her…her everything. It's everywhere.

Someone drops to their knees, startling me. I stop myself from pulling Shelley aside when I realize it's Wickham. Relief floods my body.

"Thank the skies. Is Tera—*What are you doing?*" I shriek.

Shelley's shallow breathing intensifies as Wickham rolls his sleeves up and *shoves his arm into her exposed stomach*.

"What do you think you're doing?" I scream again, my voice rising with each word.

Wickham doesn’t acknowledge me as he blows a strand of blond hair, speckled with blood, out of his eyes. He doesn’t stop digging.

Shelley gasps once, ragged and weak, before she stops breathing. An unnatural type of stillness, belonging only to the dead, settles on her.

Not for long.

Because Wickham’s wretched searching rocks her body slightly. Her arms twitch on the grass. Her head lolls to the side.

I lose it.

With a scream, I rise to my feet and tackle the deplorable scum of a man to the ground. He lands with a thud. I straddle him, pinning his arms to his sides with my knees as I yell, hitting him in the face with every word I spit until I don’t even know what I shout anymore.

This disgusting piece of filth chose to rummage through a poor, kind woman’s insides instead of helping her. I told her she was not alone—I told her I wouldn’t abandon her—and I let him do this to her.

Something heavy and furry collides with me, knocking me off Wickham. Through my tears, I can’t tell who’s who. Who’s shifted into what.

All I see in my mind’s eye is Shelley. Frail, quiet Shelley.

I told her I wouldn’t leave her.

I told her I wouldn’t abandon her.

Sobbing, I leave the fighting behind me as I crawl toward pale, motionless Shelley.

When I reach her, I bawl even harder. She’s so broken.

Squeezing the tears from my eyes, I cough and force myself to look at her. Force myself to help her.

I should…

I should help her. Somehow.

I…

Maybe I can put her back together. Not wholly, but better.

My breaths come in gasps as the mess that was once Shelley overwhelms me. I curl my hands into fists and inhale through clenched teeth.

I gag, but I can’t let Wickham’s filthy hands be the last that touch her. Not like this.

Skies, let me hold it together. Just long enough for her to get at least a little of the respect she deserves. If not in life, at least in death.

Looking down at the shambles Wickham had left behind, a high-pitched noise leaves my throat as pieces of Shelley slip through my shaking fingers. I put as much of her back together as I can, but it doesn't seem enough. Nothing seems enough.

Because nothing is enough.

Still shaking, I finally brave a glance at the clash still happening around us—its sounds muted in my roaring ears—when something catches my eye.

It glints silver from within the pooled blood of Shelley's stomach. My chest tightens. It feels as if my mind and my body have separated as I watch my arm reach down for it.

My shaking hand drops into the same place Wickham's just was. My stomach turns. A gag rises. Still, I can't seem to stop myself. Carefully, delicately, and disturbing as little as possible, my trembling fingers wrap around a thin, silver chain.

I watch as my arm lifts, taking the strand with it.

Lifting, lifting, until a small amulet swings at the end.

I watch as my other hand wipes the crimson from the tiny medallion, revealing two triangles too far apart to resemble mountains, but close enough to look—I squint—like the ears of a cat.

Something in my chest stirs, warming. Almost like it wants me to touch the amulet. To hold it in my palms, to clutch it tight, and to never let it go.

I shiver as my racing pulse pounds in my ears like thunder, increasing in volume until it's deafening, drowning out the clamour behind me. I want to drop the chain and clap my hands over my ears, but I can't. My body heats—or maybe it's the chain.

Roaring like I've never heard before booms so loudly, I must feel it in my bones—in my soul. I clutch the medallion in one hand and jump, ready to defend Shelley's body, when hot fire sears my palm, scorching my insides as it rips up my arm, sprinting toward my chest.

A strangled cry makes its way out of my burning throat.

Fire, flames, pain.

Molten, boiling, burning.

I see nothing but red—nothing but heat.

Then, it disappears, releasing the pressure on my chest.

I take mighty gasps of air, afraid I might never breathe again. My fists press against my chest, and my body curls inward as if I might protect myself from whatever had scalded me from within.

Cool air soothes my burning insides. I blink away the involuntary tears to see the chaos has ended, but not in a good way. Not in the way I'd hoped.

Kieran is back in his human form, though he and Wickham are both on their knees, glaring up at the huge man with white-blond hair silencing them with cuffs. The bear shifter does not so much as snarl at the man dressed in all black. Though he might rival Kieran in size, there's no mistaking the disparity in build—and likely skill—between the two.

At their feet lies the wolf, bleeding and unmoving.

Another man, nearly as tall and as lean as his friend, though his hair shines silvery-white in the moonlight instead of white-blond, makes his way toward the bodies scattered around the clearing—the result of their vicious battle—kicking at bodies of wolves, shifters, and royal guards alike.

"Nothing," he says after crouching to feel for a pulse on a shifter who's clearly not dressed in the Dracori's uniform. A Rebel, maybe?

But I realize he isn't in a royal uniform, either. Neither is the one who cuffed Kieran and Wickham. Just who ambushed us? Who would be so powerful as to—

A third man grunts in reply.

The first—the mountain of a shifter—turns to his friend, and all the air leaves my lungs as I follow his gaze.

Three powerful men.

Three men in black.

Three royal insignias on the shoulders of their armour.

They aren't just Dracori. They aren't even Dracori Knights.

They're the King's Three.

Consisting of the King's Justice and his two cousins, the dragon shifter and the wolf shifters are the most powerful, most lethal people of Selerune.

And they're here.

I swallow my gasp, but it comes out as a squeak, calling the attention of all the shifters—both kneeling and the standing Three. Kieran and Wickham stare at me with eyes full of fury when they notice my hands are unbound. Even without saying a word, I understand they want me to run.

But where can I run? Where would I go? How could I possibly escape the deadliest shifters of the kingdom when I'm just me?

The fair-haired cousins study me from head to toe with their matching dark-grey eyes, taking in my ripped clothes and bloodied arms. White-Blond tilts his head. Silver-White furrows his brows.

But the third…

The King’s Justice—the only dragon shifter in all of Sylfar—glares at me with enough fire and hatred, it seems he’s hoping to incinerate me with his golden gaze alone. The scar running from his forehead to the end of the dark, left eyebrow, barely hidden by pieces of shadow-black hair, exemplifies his deep scowl of loathing, the pure hostility on his expression making me step back just to put any modicum of distance between us.

His gaze dips to the ground, to my feet stumbling in retreat. I freeze, held in place by his cruel gaze. My skin prickles hot and cold as his nose flares, lip curling with disdain.

He’s the most handsome man I’ve ever seen.

And I’ve never wanted to run from anyone more than I do from him.

A shiver crawls down my back, slow but sure, as if even it is too afraid of sudden movements in the presence of the wicked King’s Justice. Swallowing, my legs turn leaden once more.

Do I speak?

Do I…

The blonds lift a brow each. The Justice narrows his eyes.

I can’t even move a finger under the weight of their gazes.

They’re dressed in various shades of black and grey, armoured and armed to the teeth. Nothing like the Dracori at all, who now seem harmless in comparison.

If I had a slim chance of escaping the king’s guards, I have no hope of escaping the King’s Three.

The Justice blinks his eyes slowly, and each time he hides that golden gaze from me, those are the only moments I can breathe. All too quickly, though, his hatred returns, stealing the air from my lungs with those iron claws he’s infamously known for—even without unsheathing them at all.

Someone exhales loudly, and I startle.

How long have I been held in place by fear?

How long have they been studying me?

It must have only been moments, but it feels like an entire lifetime.

“Wow, I didn’t even notice you there. Are we losing our touch?” White-Blond tilts his head the other way, then takes his eyes off me to look at the body at his feet. Nudging it with the toe of his boot, he says, “Nah. Can’t be it.”

Silver-White glances at the King’s Justice before taking a step toward me. With a lifted brow, he asks, “Are we going to have problems?”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Not even another embarrassing squeak.

“He asked you a question,” growls the golden-eyed beast—because he’s far too intimidating to be a mere man. The rumble of his voice is so deep with that incomprehensible hatred, I fear it might have penetrated my soul.

Silver-White’s gaze flicks to his dark-haired cousin before taking another step forward. “Maybe she didn’t hear, Kane.” Silver-White lifts a hand, palm facing me as if it makes him look any less fearsome. The other hand pulls a pair of shackles from behind his back. “Are we going to have problems?”

I look at the men kneeling on the ground behind them. Wickham stares blankly into the distance. Kieran’s head is dipped low, the locks of dark hair pulled loose from the tail at the back of his neck draping over his shoulder, though I can tell he’s watching as the events unfold. With the slightest movement, he catches my eye. A subtle shake of his head brings me back to the present.

“I don’t know, Greyson. Let’s just get back.” White-Blond jerks Kieran and Wickham up by the cuffs. “Throw some shackles on her, and let’s get out of here. Kane looks like he needs a drink.”

The King’s Justice—Kane—growls deep and low; feral. It reminds me of Samyel, only worse. Ten times worse. One hundred times worse.

“Maverik,” says Silver-White.

“Grey,” replies White-Blond.

The two men stare at each other, ignoring their third cousin. Though there are no physical implications of such, it seems they have a silent conversation.

I don’t dare even to sneak a glance at the Justice, but in my periphery, I can see his stiff shoulders. His clenched fists. His tight jaw. The heat of his gaze burning me all over. The glare I can’t return. The other two notice as well, turning from each other to face him. Kieran and Wickham remain silent and motionless.

“You need a drink now?” asks the one named Maverik. He tilts his head at Grey. “Greyson?”

Greyson places a hand on the Justice’s armour-clad shoulder.

When he doesn’t get a response, Greyson *shakes* the King’s Justice as if Kane’s dragon form couldn’t kill us all with one sweep of his paw.

Finally, the Justice releases me from his piercing gaze. I slump slightly before righting myself. I’m still catching my breath, my head spinning with the intensity of fear, when Greyson stops in front of me.

I hadn’t even noticed he was walking.

Biting my lip, I shuffle my feet so I stand between him and Shelley.

As if I can do anything.

He knows it, too. His brow furrows as he looks down at her broken body before turning to my bloody hands.

“You do this?” he asks, voice softer than I expected.

I can’t help but tremble, even when I will my body to stay still. My hands are curled into tight fists—had I even opened them at some point?—and still, nothing comes out when I open my mouth. All I can do is shake my head.

Dark-grey eyes study my face, letting the silence blanket us. I drop my gaze, and I don’t dare look up, studying the toes of my wrecked shoes. The crimson darkening my fingernails. Fighting the shiver from golden heat I can already feel has turned back to me.

Behind Greyson, Maverik gives Kieran and Wickham a shove before walking up to the Justice. Laying a hand on his cousin’s shoulder, Maverik pushes him aside and leans in to say something. The Justice snarls in response.

“I’m going to put you in cuffs.” Greyson draws my attention back. I shake even harder, but I swallow and lift my head to face him. Looking into the face of my doom feels like the right thing to do.

I lick my lips and clear my throat. The Justice freezes, burning eyes sliding back to me. Maverik stops too, though he’s focused on the dragon shifter.

“What—um. What about…” My voice cracks. I look down at Shelley. A sob gets stuck in my throat.

Greyson’s light eyebrows knit together in confusion. “What about her?”

“She…she didn’t deserve…” I swallow a rising whimper. “She didn’t deserve this.”

Understanding crosses the wolf shifter’s countenance, but he shakes his head. “We can’t take her with us. The locals will be notified to come and…clean up.”

My stomach sinks.

Will Tera even know what happened to her sister?

I've experienced the unfortunate truth of siblings abandoning each other, but would a twin do the same?

I want to fight Greyson. I want to tell him he has to help. I want to *make* him help. Shelley might have committed a crime, but she didn't deserve a death like this. She doesn't deserve to be left alone like *this*.

But that burning gaze is still on me. Without turning to look at the Justice, I feel the heat on my skin from his vicious hatred.

I take one last look at Shelley, barely choking down another rising sob as I apologize for being unable to help her. As I apologize for having abandoned her.

In some dark corner of my mind, a small voice tells me I've known this woman for less than a day. I have no obligation to her. Nothing ties me to her; nothing connects us past having shared a caravan as prisoners. I barely know her.

Yet, that bruised, aching part of my heart can't seem to let go—can't seem to let *her* go—because doing so reminds me too much of my own abandonment. I know it isn't the same. I know it isn't remotely even similar.

Still, tears blur my vision as Greyson shackles my wrists and leads me toward Kieran and Wickham, who are still at Maverik's side.

When we approach the Justice, I take two extra steps to move farther from him and put more distance between us. He stands motionless, as if now, he's the one rooted in place. I don't dare look at him, but the little hairs on the back of my neck rise from the heat of his glare.

A breeze wends its way through this wrecked part of the forest, casting bumps all along my skin where it's exposed to the air. A jagged inhalation draws my eyes up, and I accidentally look upon the Justice's angular face.

The wind lifts pieces of his ink-black hair, adding more mess to the tousle and revealing the start of the scar slashing downward from his forehead. He snaps his teeth together, clenching his jaw and emphasizing the already-sharp lines of his face. His broad shoulders rise with his heavy breathing as the breaths slowly turn into low growls.

A large hand presses against his powerful chest, pushing with enough force that the Justice nearly stumbles back.

"Calm," commands the dark voice of Maverik.

I can’t seem to look away even as Greyson’s hand wraps around my elbow. Not even when the white-blond hair tied at the nape of Maverik’s neck fills my vision as he steps in front of the Justice, blocking my view of the growling, golden-eyed beast.

The hand on my arm tightens. Then another presses at the small of my back.

The savage growling intensifies.

Greyson adds pressure to his touch, guiding me from Maverik. From the forest. From the death.

From the King’s Justice.

His hand lifts from my back, gesturing for Kieran and Wickham to move. They do so without hesitation, shuffling faster as the evil emanating from the Justice grows thicker and louder.

I let Greyson tug me into following the two thieves, but my feet seem capable of moving only at a glacial pace even when my hammering heart wants nothing more than to sprint away from here and never look back. Never look back upon the face of the King’s Justice.

Except I do look back.

And when I do, the King’s Justice is crouched near the ground, holding Shelley in his arms, his head dipped low.

Almost as if hugging a cherished lover for the last time.

Then his head lifts.

Bile rises to my throat. I grit my teeth together just to keep it down. The back of my eyes heat with unshed tears.

His gold irises have turned entirely black.

The bottom half of his face drips with blood.

His lips part.

His teeth—his *fangs*—are coated crimson.

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CHAPTER
NINE

I stare numbly at the blank wall of the new caravan, my eyes tracing the pattern of light forming on the wooden panels. They kept the windows open this time, likely because there's no fear of escapees when the King's Three is present. Greyson and Maverik explained something about the surviving Dracori having retrieved another caravan for the remainder of our trip to the castle.

All I can think of is the Justice.

The way he looked at me as if he hated me.

The way he looked at me as if he wanted me dead.

The way he looked…with Shelley's blood all over his face.

Kieran, Wickham, and Hartley argue about something. Kieran sounds angry. Wickham scoffs. Hartley's shrill voice barely pierces the thick fog clouding my mind.

Were the whispers true?

Was he drinking her blood?

People do say dragon shifters went mad with bloodthirst, and though Kane is the last surviving dragon, there are whispers that the king couldn't save his nephew entirely from losing his mind. Maybe it's true.

Mariette shifts beside me, stretching her long legs and crossing them at the ankles. She fidgets with the chain between her cuffs. I drag a finger over the stone and metal of mine, feeling the rough material until I reach the small, black stone situated at the center of the shackle. The silence stone doesn't glow or change colour; there is nothing that indicates it is working to silence shifter magic, meaning it looks the same on me as it does on the

wrists of a shifter like Mariette. I can't remember if I told them I'm shiftless. I guess it doesn't matter.

Kieran mutters something. Hartley disagrees. Wickham chuckles.

My chest tightens.

Wickham said Tera ran away after seeing the devastation of her sister's body, but I guess being out there is better than being in here, where the King's Three travels with our caravan to ensure we make it to the royal castle in Seluria, the kingdom's capital city.

But what is the King's Three doing here at all? Surely, they have better things to do than mind the transport of prisoners.

And why does the Justice hate me so much?

I've never spoken to him. Never met him. I've only heard rumours of the atrocities he commits on behalf of the king. Torturing traitors. Burning down entire towns. He and his cousins are known to be lethal killers.

I close my eyes.

Those golden irises stare back at me through the darkness, burning with the hatred of a thousand suns.

When I open them again, Kieran's dark eyes narrow at me from across the caravan; his intensity does not hold a candle to the King's Justice, but it sends unease clawing up my back all the same.

"What?" I ask.

Anger crosses the bear shifter's face. "Have you heard nothing of what we've been saying?"

I match his glare with my own. "No, in fact. I have not."

Wickham's lips pull into a sneer, and he doesn't even try to hide it when he catches me looking. The foul, wretched man whose hands are as red as mine. Who hadn't wanted to help Shelley. I'm a fool for having thought otherwise.

If he's lying about Tera's escape, at the very least, I hope the twins are together and at peace.

"Did you or did you not see the Venihira Ragana in Shelley's body?" Wickham's quiet voice carries the underlying tone of malice, but it doesn't scare me. Not even as the others turn to watch my reaction.

I've been outnumbered before and survived. Today, I looked into the golden eyes of the King's Justice—eyes glazed with unfounded hatred and disgust—and I survived that, too.

I've held a woman's entrails in my hands.

I've fought shiftless with more integrity than the vile shifter sitting across from me.

With a dramatic sigh, I lean back into my seat. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The amulet!" Wickham says. "The damn amulet she swallowed."

I blink.

Shelley had mentioned she'd swallowed an amulet when they were apprehended, but this is the first I'm hearing its name.

"The amulet of the venihira," he growls, brushing blood-crusted blond hair from his eyes. "The Venihira Ragana. Where is it?"

I remember the glint of the chain. I remember lifting the medallion from her stomach.

Looking down at my empty, bound hands, I flex my fingers as if the cat-ear medallion might appear in my palm.

It had exuded heat, and that fire had crawled up my arm.

Then where did it go?

Had I dropped it?

Only dirt and dried blood remain on my skin.

"Well?" Hartley demands, her pretty face twisted into something ugly.

"I didn't see it," I hear myself say. "I was…busy trying to save her."

The words feel silly now that the rush of adrenaline has passed. The fear and pain have settled, and I understand now it was impossible to have helped her. Impossible to have put her back together. I exhale through my nose, casting the image of her brokenness from my mind.

Kieran lets out a groan of frustration, throwing himself back into his seat. Hartley looks as if she wants to throw her hands in the air, but she only shakes the chains connecting her cuffs.

Wickham narrows his eyes at me.

"What?" I lift a brow. "You don't believe me?"

He shakes his head slowly, holding my gaze.

But he's nothing compared to the King's Justice, and I don't even blink.

Eventually, he situates himself back on the bench, too.

"I can't believe we lost the only thing we got from that stupid raid," Kieran mutters, shaking the chain to cross his arms and closing his eyes as he rests his head against the wall. "That was the only thing we even had left to show for all this."

I look down at my soiled hands.

The blood still in the creases of my palm and my fingers.

The questions still unanswered.

I wake with a jolt. Even disoriented, the sensation of dread is heavy and real.

At first, I don't remember where I am, wondering if maybe I've just had a bad dream. But when I blink the sleep from my eyes and tune into the sounds around me, that sense of foreboding builds into anxious anticipation. I'm still in the caravan, but we've stopped. The door is open, and Wickham's already halfway out, Hartley close on his heels. Mariette barely glances at me before rising from her seat at my side. Kieran must have already exited.

Rolling my neck to ease it from the ache of having slept in such a terrible position, I bite my lip and stand, following the short-haired brunette out the door.

We step out of the caravan and onto cobblestone, where we fall in line with Kieran, Wickham, and Hartley. Even the early morning sun is too bright, and I squint at the ground to let my eyes adjust. The roads in Seluria are cleaner than those around Grengrove, which makes sense—a king would want the areas he sees most often to be better maintained—but this is the first time in my memory that I've gone so far from home, so maybe bigger towns and cities generally receive better care.

I never thought I'd ever see our capital city, much less the royal castle. I just wish it were under better circumstances.

As I consider studying my surroundings, deep male voices off to the side mutter in conversation, giving me more reason to keep my eyes trained on the cobblestones at my feet. My heart picks up in pace when I hear the King's Justice. I can't make out his words, and my head spins with indecision; I don't want to know what he's saying—I don't want to attract more attention than I already have—but I'm also worried it might concern me.

I shiver as other questions whip through my mind.

Are his eyes still black?

Is his face still covered in blood?

Are his lips still painted red?

I can't help the sharp gasp when black boots appear in my vision. Clenching my fists to keep them from trembling, I drag my eyes up.

Relief washes over me, a cool wave dousing the fires of fear.

It's not the King's Justice.

It's not even Greyson or Maverik.

It's a woman dressed in familiar Dracori garb, though the uniform looks to be in better condition than what I'm accustomed to seeing around town.

A dark-brown braid rests on her shoulder, draping over the vest she opens to pull out a pencil; the two swords hanging at her hip shuffle with her movement. Lifting the clipboard in her other hand, she nods as the two remaining Dracori, Olivia and Erin, give a brief report.

They'd survived when others weren't so lucky, and it seems they will be rewarded for it.

The three Dracori fall into conversation, but I don't try to eavesdrop. I'm too shocked by our surroundings to consider what comes next, having finally worked up the courage to drink it all in.

Our carriage is parked by a large wooden gate, on what appears to be the grounds of Selerune Castle. Though it's closed now, I assume we entered through those massive double doors, because on either side are tall stone walls stretching farther than I can see, interrupted only by the presence of several towers. The cobblestone road we're on leads deeper into the grounds before splitting into several paths, one of which goes straight to an enormous white and gold palace exuding extravagance—nothing like the defensive structures along the stone walls protecting the grounds.

Someone says my name, cutting short my admiration of Selerune Castle; the Dracori are reporting on their cargo—us, the prisoners—including who we are and why we're here.

Mariette's head tilts when Olivia recites my crime, but the woman with the clipboard doesn't question Olivia further.

I wince as Erin moves on to describe the attack.

The Dracori continues nodding as she writes notes and, with two long swipes of her pencil, I can only assume she crosses off the twins' names.

Wherever Tera is, I hope she's safe.

The sound of footsteps draws my attention as more royal guards join us, and only then do I notice the King's Justice and his cousins are gone. I allow myself a sigh of relief, but the moment's reprieve disappears when I

realize some Dracori motion for us to follow while others hop onto the driver's bench of the caravan and drive it in another direction.

"Where are you taking us?" Kieran asks. Despite my ire at his general unnecessary cruelty, I have to admire his brazenness. I certainly can't bring myself to question the Dracori, especially within the walls of Selerune Castle.

A male guard snorts. The other, a woman, punches him in the arm. Both wear the royal uniform, but like the woman with the clipboard, the quality of their garb is much higher than what I'm used to seeing. One sword hangs from each of their belts, and I can't help but wonder how often the castle is attacked.

Armed Dracori are a common sight in Grengrove and surrounding towns, but we have no walls nor gates protecting us—and even then, it's not uncommon for guards working together to share weaponry. Who is King Waylon protecting himself against with the tall walls, defensive towers, and the heavily armed Dracori?

"The dungeons." The male guard answers in a curt tone implying no other questions should be asked.

Kieran doesn't seem to understand, but Wickham shoves his shoulder into Kieran's when the bear shifter opens his mouth to ask another.

The five of us walk in silence as the two Dracori guide us off the main road and onto a dirt one that follows the exterior of the extravagant palace situated at the center of the grounds. I feel silly for the disappointment bubbling in my chest; I'm not here as a visitor but as a prisoner. There is no use in gawking at what's to be my prison for the foreseeable future.

Still, I can't help but admire the lush greenery within the Castle's walls. The level grass, trimmed hedges, and sparse trees all seem curated with intention, and if my eyes do not deceive me, there even appears to be a forest at the farthest end of the grounds.

Spots of bitterness slice through my begrudging appreciation. Is this how King Waylon spends his money instead of helping his people? While our towns worry about having enough to make it through each winter—through each season—he's paying for flowers to be planted along each path?

The first Dracori opens a plain wooden door at the back side of the palace, ushering us in. When I step onto the clean black-and-white tiles, I hold myself back from wincing; my shoes, like those of the others, are

covered in dried mud, blood, and more. It feels wrong to mar the sleek floor, but I remind myself it's also wrong to have brought me here at all for the so-called *crime* I didn't even commit.

I make sure to stomp a little harder as we make our way through a series of hallways, leaving little trails of our presence until we stop at another door.

This door, while plain like the one from which we entered the palace, sends shivers down my spine. Calamity and misfortune oozes from the other side; instantly, I know we stand before the entrance to the dungeon.

The others shuffle their feet as the Dracori pulls the door open, its creak making even Kieran flinch.

Each guard pulls a lantern from the wall, removing the lighting stick attached at the side and opening the little glass door to activate it by holding the end of the stick against the wick. The lantern flickers to life, and the woman enters the dark void, lighting the other wall lanterns as she goes, illuminating the set of long stairs leading down into the dungeon.

With a grunt from the second Dracori and a nervous look shared between the prisoners, Kieran takes the first step to follow the guards.

The light flickers, and my heart hammers as my foot lands on the stairs. Despite my mind knowing it's not true, the walls still seem to close around me the deeper we go, and the closer we get to the dungeon.

The closer I get to being locked up.

The farther I get from my freedom.

The rest of the way is a blur. Though I know I should have taken care to better observe the surroundings and get my bearings, it feels like I blinked and am suddenly being told to enter a cell.

It's one of many down here, each with bars at the front and facing the stairs we'd come down. The wall lanterns cast dancing shadows that reveal the dark despondence before us.

Numbly, I follow Mariette and Hartley. My head hums with anxiety as soon as I walk through the opened door of our cell to see the four piles of straw in the small space. Two against the far wall. One on each of the sides, against the walls shared with the other cells. When I turn, the man is already throwing the bars back into place. The thick sound of it slamming closed echoes in the dungeon, mixing with what appears to be the groans of prisoners in the other cells.

Is it better or worse that we're not alone in here?

My tongue feels too big for my mouth. My throat tightens. My chest presses against my heart.

I watch through the bars as the Dracori pulls a board from the wall on the other side. She writes something on it while her partner takes a ring of keys from his belt. He beckons us forward.

Mariette is the first to approach, crouching to the ground when he does the same. He opens a smaller door that I hadn't noticed before and motions for her hands. She puts her hands through the opening, and he unlocks her cuffs, placing them on the ground as he motions for Hartley.

I don't bother telling him they didn't need to shackle me anyway.

Once the man scoops up our shackles and locks the little door again, the female Dracori clears her throat.

"You'll be held in these dungeon cells until you get to speak with the Dracori Captain. You'll have a chance to make your appeal and explain your crimes before receiving your sentence." A sardonic smile crosses her face. "We are quite busy, though. So she might not get to schedule you in for a little while."

Unease roils in my stomach. While this delays the potential of condemnation, it also means I remain uncertain about my future. I bite my lip to keep from thinking about just how close I was to freedom. I bite it so hard, I can't think of anything but the pain.

"Don't worry, though," says the male Dracori. "Until then, you get the privilege of earning your keep. We'll come by and fetch volunteers to help around the grounds."

The way he says the words *privilege* and *help* makes me think these will be anything but pleasant tasks.

They turn to leave, but Kieran shouts, "When will we be fed?"

My eyebrows rise. I hadn't even thought of food, but suddenly, my stomach feels very empty.

"Meals are served thrice a day," answers the man. "When someone remembers."

With a sigh, the woman adds, "Lunch was served early today, but you'll get one before the day is over."

They leave without looking back.

The sound of the door closing echoes all the way down to the bottom of the stairs.

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CHAPTER

TEN

"You ladies still alive?" Wickham asks from his and Kieran's side of the dungeon.

I glance at the wall I've claimed for myself, on which I've made three marks with a piece of chipped stone I found on the floor by my straw bed; it's been three meals since we arrived, which must mean we're likely halfway through the second day. With no windows down here, there is no other way of tracking the passage of time, though I got the idea to use marks from the hundreds of etched tallies on the far wall.

Who knows what the previous prisoner was tracking? How long they had been locked away?

My stomach continues twisting, and the buzzing in my head persists.

"How are you doing?" Hartley asks, perking up from her spot on the floor and rising to place her hands on the bars of the cell. She's refused to sleep on a straw pile, opting for the bare stone ground, instead.

"Oh, just lying around," replies Wickham. "How is life on your side of things? Getting ready to start a cat fight yet?"

Hartley snickers, draping her arms through the bars and leaning against them. Even Mariette and I crack a smile. If there were ever the time and place for such a bad omen as a cat, this would be it.

"No, but with all the yowling from the other cells, I'm sure they've already lost it," says the redhead. She shifts to rest an elbow on the horizontal bar, propping her head up with her hand. "When do you think they'll change the bucket?"

I wince, shifting away from the aforementioned bucket and its disgusting corner. Thankfully, with Hartley refusing to claim a pile of straw,

Mariette and I have been able to sleep farthest from the toilet bucket. Still, in the stale air of the dungeon, it's impossible to escape the acrid stench.

More groaning from the other cells.

"If that were one of the tasks to reduce your sentence, would you do it?" Wickham asks.

Hartley hums, picking at dirt on the bars. "I don't know. It's kind of gross, don't you think?" She groans. "Skies, if only I could shift and fly through these."

"I'd change all the buckets if it means I can get out of here," Kieran grumbles. "Or maybe just let the brunette loose. Let her panther snap up the red bird. Anything to get out of this inane conversation."

Get out of here? I sit up straighter.

Hartley doesn't turn to see Mariette's feline grin.

"But the toilets, Kieran?" Hartley's face pinches with disgust as she blows a strand of red hair from her face, ignoring the insult. "Really?"

Someone moans.

"You hear that, right?" he answers. I can practically see the bear shifter rolling his eyes. "Is a little peace and quiet too much to ask for?"

"But still. Toilets?"

Now Mariette rolls her eyes.

Yet, no one seems surprised at the words still bouncing in my head.

Get out of here.

"But there's also—"

"What do you mean by getting out of here?" I'm not even sure who I interrupted, but based on Hartley's glare, it must have been Wickham.

Mariette raises a brown eyebrow at me from where she sits on her straw bed, propped up on an elbow. Hartley turns and copies the other woman's expression.

"To reduce your sentence?" Hartley scoffs as if she can't believe I don't know what she's talking about.

"Do you really not know?" Mariette asks in a much kinder, yet equally bewildered, tone.

It's the first time I've heard her voice, and while Hartley doesn't seem to care, Wickham asks, "Is that Mariette I hear? Did you finally get her to talk?"

"Enough with the chatting," groans Kieran.

Hartley scowls at the quiet shifter by my side before sliding her brown—nearly grey in the dungeon's dim light—eyes to me. "You heard the Dracori."

Frustration mounds in my chest, my patience wearing thin. "I heard him, yes. He said we'd have to *earn our keep* until our appeal with the Dracori Captain. Nothing about cleaning buckets. Or how to get out of here otherwise."

Mariette responds before Hartley can annoy me further. "Depending on the type of sentencing, you can shorten it or even earn a pardon through various means."

A dangerous spark of hope threatens to glimmer in my heart. I smother it as fast as I can, unwilling—and unable—to bear the devastation if they're lying. But something about Mariette's sombre expression says she's telling the truth.

"What type of sentencing gets the chance to do that?" I swallow the lump in my throat and bite my lip in anticipation, fingers twitching against the stone ground.

Hartley shrugs, casual in a way that is the exact opposite of the maelstrom thrumming in my head. "As long as you're not gifted to nobles or something. I heard if you stay on castle grounds, there are opportunities."

"Not that the opportunities are any good—for your health or otherwise." Mariette's eyes narrow, and she runs a hand through her short, chestnut hair. While Hartley was only too excited for Wickham's attention in retelling the story of how the Dracori had found her the night we'd nearly escaped, Mariette did not experience the same enthusiasm for sharing the tale of her recapture. But when the panther shifter was brought back to the caravan, she'd lost the ties holding the two short tails at the top of her head, and her light-brown locks were mussed like she'd been in a struggle.

"As long as it's not cleaning toilet buckets, I think I'd go for anything." Hartley sighs. "What about you, Wickham?"

"What are the opportunities?" I blurt out before he can answer.

Hartley sighs again, long and dramatic, but she glances at Mariette before her shoulders droop slightly. "I've heard a lot of things, but it sounds like it can get pretty dangerous, actually."

Mariette scoffs. "That's putting it lightly."

I lift both eyebrows. Worse than fighting in The Cage?

“Scouting for silence stones, helping the Dracori apprehend criminals…” Hartley waves a hand.

“Oh,” I gasp, scratching at the dull, black stone embedded in the stone at my feet and glancing at the same stones in each bar. Silence stones don’t have to touch a shifter to cut off their access to magic—though the effect is much stronger with contact—just being nearby will do the trick if there are enough to surround the shifters. These cells definitely have enough—they’re fixed in every direction, in every wall, and in every bar, at most a few paces apart. “I’ve never considered prisoners might help the Dracori.”

The panther shifter at my side snorts. “Those are the easy tasks.”

Even Hartley’s eyes widen.

“Depending on your control of your abilities, you could even get sent on raids for the Dracori. For the Dracori. Not with.” Mariette’s piercing green eyes hold my gaze, and I’m unable to look away. “You could even be forced to join the Watchers.”

“The…Watchers?” My voice is less steady than I care to admit. At their disbelief, I shake my head. “I mean, I know what the Watchers are. I knew getting condemned could get you sent to the front lines against the Rebels. But they would ask that? Even without condemnation? To *join* the Watchers? How would prisoners take down the Rebels?”

Hartley looks unsure, but she doesn’t protest.

“Yeah, the Watchers.” Mariette nods, then she lifts a shoulder, turning away to stare at the blank wall. “Because our lives don’t matter to the king. We’re expendable. They’ll send us on the most dangerous of assignments, because if we die, it won’t matter. But if we succeed, we’d chip away at our sentence.”

A moment of silence falls over the dungeon. Even the other prisoners are quiet.

“Then there’s the King’s Three,” Kieran says, his voice barely audible. “The Justice and his cousins.”

Someone—it sounds like Wickham—exhales long and hard. “Yeah, I think I’d rather clean all the palace’s buckets than risk that.”

One look to Hartley, and she starts to explain.

“Apparently, there’s always the option to go out with the King’s Three. If you can survive an assignment with them, you’re given an automatic full pardon. A completely clean slate.” Hartley closes her eyes as she speaks, a

small smile spreading on her face. “And you’re given a mark that frees you from condemnation for ten years. Ten. Whole. Years.”

“Except no one has ever survived.” Mariette’s brusque words earn her a glare from the redhead, but I don’t blame the panther shifter. “And no one knows exactly what those assignments are, or what happens on them, or even where they go. You know, because *no one has ever survived*.”

Dragon shifters were known to be ruthless, which is why, as the only living dragon shifter, the Justice works well as King Waylon’s right hand. Flanked by his wolf cousins, the King’s Three dole out punishments to any who oppose their uncle. While they’re far too valuable to be part of the Watchers on the front lines, I shudder to think of what they *are* involved in.

Especially because, despite their legendary power, dragons shifters eventually lost the throne—and their minds—when their bloodthirst started. The oldest of stories sometimes describes the slow descent into madness as if they had never bonded with their dragons at all, despite having been perfectly fine for years. No one dares to say it too loudly, but most know the dark history of King Waylon and why he rules alone: Centuries ago, he forced all newborn dragons—the only shifters identifiable from birth due to their signature gold eyes—to be taken away for their own safety along with the rest of the kingdom until they succumbed to their own madness. No one knows where they were taken, and no one has ever dared to ask.

When the Rebels emerged about 150 years ago, so did the King’s Justice.

Somewhere down the line, the king found a way to help his nephew with his bloodthirst, saving Kane from the same fate as the other dragon shifters. Thus the Justice was released to wreak havoc and destruction to his uncle’s enemies alongside Greyson and Maverik.

I believe Mariette when she says no one has returned from working with the King’s Three.

“That’s why I would rather clean buckets.” Wickham’s voice drifts from the other side of the cell. “At least I could chip away at whatever sentence I get, and at least I’d know what task I’m given. With the Justice? No chance. Who knows where they might take us? What they might make us do?”

I shudder and silently agree with Wickham.

“Besides,” Hartley says quietly, twisting a curl of hair between two fingers. The flickering lantern across the dungeon casts a glow on her face, highlighting the roundness of her cheeks and reminding me that while she

might talk loudly, she's still young. "People say he kills for fun. They say he's not entirely in control, you know?"

I saw the crimson dripping from his mouth.

I watched those golden eyes turn black.

I know.

"Maybe that's why no one ever makes it back from going out with them. Maybe the Justice's dragon eats them," Kieran says with a snicker. "Besides, best not to get too hopeful. They might make us clean buckets anyway, even without lessening your sentence at all."

"But even to get the option of reducing your sentence would require getting a sentence first," I say, more to myself than to anyone else, because condemnation for me is different from condemnation for them.

We're finally given the *privilege* of earning our keep on the third day. Every morning since then, we're shackled through the meal slot before the guards release us onto the grounds to receive our duties for the day. Just as we'd feared, we're given the worst tasks—ones not even the lowest paid servants would want. In the following days, from cleaning toilets to shovelling horse manure, I learn the pretty flowers and trimmed hedges are all planted on soil prepared by prisoners.

At night, we're taken back to our cells. The guards release us from our bindings before pushing our dinners through the slot and locking it once more.

In that time, other prisoners have come and gone, but the five of us aren't given the chance to appeal to the Dracori Captain.

My bones ache from the manual labour, and having to do it while shackled makes things worse. At least it seems someone else has committed worse crimes than the members of our group, because when we're returned to our cells tonight, Hartley exclaims with joy that our bucket has been changed.

Mariette finishes her food first, followed quickly by me and Hartley. We stack our bowls by the slot and lie on our beds; Hartley had given in on the third night and finally slept on the last pile of straw after Mariette and I split the filling of the fourth to pad our own.

Rubbing my sore shoulders, I've nearly drifted to sleep when the door at the top of the stairs creaks open. Hartley and I immediately sit up, and though Mariette doesn't move, I know she's watching, too.

Waiting.

I glance at the wall where I've marked the number of meals we've received. Six days. We've been here almost a week; could we finally be receiving our chance to see the Dracori Captain?

A pair of Dracori descend and walk into the glow of the lanterns. One woman grabs the lighting stick from the nearest lantern and activates both; the flames grow, brightening the dungeon, and I blink against the sudden light. The other Dracori unhooks the clipboards at each side of our cells, handing one to the other guard before pulling out cuffs from behind her back.

The brown-haired Dracori sucks on her teeth before speaking. "Kieran, Wickham, Hartley, and Mariette." She looks into our cell, then she looks to our left, where Kieran and Wickham are locked. "It's your lucky day."

My scalp tingles. Anxiety replaces the blood thrumming in my veins. My hands tremble as I push myself up and stand, words caught in my throat.

Hartley and Mariette make their way to the front, the redhead crouching first and sticking her wrists through the slot.

"W-what about me?" I stammer when the bars creak open.

The guard looks down at the clipboard while the other locks Hartley's wrists. "Scarlet? That your name?"

I nod stiffly, swallowing the rising nerves. *Please, let the skies have pity on me. Don't leave me here alone. Don't abandon me in this place all by myself.*

As bad as the past week has been, as much as my life has fallen apart, it's been almost tolerable because at least I wasn't on my own.

The Dracori slips her hand into her pants pocket and pulls out a note. She compares it to the clipboard before shaking her head once. "Sorry. Your name's not on the list. Maybe the next batch."

The next…?

My breathing shortens as Mariette and Hartley are led out of the cell. The door slams closed, the lock clicks shut, and suddenly, the walls are closing in on me as I watch Kieran and Wickham follow the others toward the stairs.

Just as Wickham takes the first step, he turns and gives me a wicked smile.

My saliva turns sour in my mouth as my stomach turns, threatening to upheave the dinner I'd just consumed. One glance at the bucket, and I snap my mouth closed, forcing my body to settle even as my mind races.

Mariette is grumpy and barely talks, but she's decent company. And while Hartley is…Hartley, her incessant nattering keeps dark thoughts from crowding the edges of my mind—even if she's unnecessarily snarky sometimes.

Kieran is cruel for no reason, and I'll never look at Wickham the same way, but knowing they're here—that I'm not alone—has made all the difference.

Whether they're released or sentenced during their meeting with the captain, they're not coming back. Given the chance, they'll all choose to serve their sentences elsewhere. Who would come back to this pit, where we clean chambers and shovel manure and scrub between the floor tiles of every room?

I chuckle softly and take a deep breath, blinking against unshed tears. Maybe if they're forced to do bucket duty. Maybe then they'd come back…

I don't see any of my caravan mates for a few meals, even though I've spent time today both outside on the grounds and inside the palace. Rubbing my nose while on my hands and knees, I dip my tiny brush into the bucket of water and rinse off the grime before bringing it back to the line of filth between the rubber mats covering the floor of the training room.

Calling it a room is an understatement. Below the palace resides not only the dungeons, but a massive open area filled with all manner of weapons, weights, and even an arena.

It's quiet now, with only a few shifters using the equipment, but in the hours I've been cleaning the floors, Dracori of all shapes and sizes have come. This place is bigger and more comprehensive than my wildest dreams; Spencer's training room is nothing in comparison. Thankfully, I wasn't instructed to clean the entire floor of this substantial room, having been delegated only the spot about halfway in and close to the wall lined by

weights and weapons. I sigh, my eyes glazing over weaponry I've never even seen, armour I don't know the names of, and items I simply cannot even imagine a use for.

Each Dracori looks to have their preferred weapon, defense, and method of training, whether they are snake, deer, bear, wolf, or another type of shifter. Despite their differences, the behaviour amongst the royal guards remains consistent. Few seem friendly with each other, and some even seem vicious enough to go for the kill when sparring in the arena—though, thankfully, deaths have yet to occur in my presence.

Being here, doing this backbreaking grunt work, it makes sense why none of the thieves came back. They have more opportunities. They don't have to toil. Why would they, when they can work toward their pardons with their shifter powers instead?

I bite my lip and take a deep breath, holding it for three counts.

It's okay.

I've been through worse.

Have I, though? asks a quiet voice in the back of my mind. *Have things been worse?*

Things were bad when our adoptive parents died eight years ago. I was only sixteen and still hoping I would get my first shift, especially when Anica shifted that same year. But then she left. I don't blame her, though. Things were tough those first months after Janica and Jonas died, and when Anica's animal turned out to be a wolf…well, opportunities opened for her instantly, and she went to apprentice as a Dracori in Greybrook.

Ajax left two years later when he shifted at eleven, but I still had Tess. She'd shifted the year after Ajax did, but she stuck it out with me for another year before she finally left, too. That was four years ago, and things only got worse until I finally saw that brief glimmer of hope last week.

I shake my head and scrub harder at the spot of grime on the floor, clenching my teeth and willing the tears away.

No, even at my worst, even when I was bloody and broken and bruised and the roof leaked rain onto three spots in the cabin, even then, things were not as bleak as they are now. I'd grown used to the isolation. Solitude was my friend. Loneliness was a companion rather than a void.

But in this past week, I'd forgotten the hard lessons I'd learned from four years of being on my own. Four years of literally fighting for my survival. I'd forgotten, and I'd let my defenses down. As crass and brusque

and horrible as they were, I'd allowed myself to grow comfortable with their presence—rudeness and all—and I'd found solace in their company. I was stupid.

I *am* stupid.

And I hate myself for it.

I hate myself for sniffling. I hate myself for having to wipe my nose with the dirty, bedraggled sleeve of my only shirt. I hate myself for having to close my eyes and count to ten just so I can put myself back together.

When I finally open my eyes, I exhale a long breath and pry my fingers from the handle of the brush, blinking away tears and shaking the tension from my hands; I know better than to allow myself thoughts of my family. I know better than to let myself fall into that same spiral I work so hard to avoid.

Today is just another day to get through. Even if no one is there when I return to the dungeon, I will survive today. I will survive tonight.

And I will survive tomorrow.

For now, I just have to survive scrubbing this floor.

I dip the small brush back into the water, giving it a little wiggle before deciding to move on to the next spot of grime.

Then I notice I don't hear any cursing or even grunting.

It's quiet.

Too quiet.

Two shifters—one in what I've deduced is the Dracori training gear of long black tights and a dark-red vest, and one in her eagle form—are frozen and staring right at me.

I open my mouth to ask, but close it immediately when I realize they're not looking at me. They're looking behind me.

The air shifts.

My skin prickles.

My instinct says *run* while my mind forces me to turn.

The two Dracori—the eagle having shifted back—dip their heads and mutter apologies as they scramble out of the arena. The hairs at the back of my neck and all along my arms stand. I want to follow. I want to go with them. I want to be anywhere but here.

My breath gets caught in my throat. Rugged, black boots appear in my line of sight as I complete my turn, still kneeled on the ground.

Despite my gut begging to keep my gaze on the ground, I almost feel as if something compels it to rise, dragging my eyes up inch by inch until I’m staring right into the fiery, golden glare of the King’s Justice.

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CHAPTER

ELEVEN

My breath gets caught in my throat. My lips part as if I know what to say.

Do I explain why I'm here?

Do I ask why he's here?

Do I…

His gaze dips to my mouth, so I close it and swallow, my tongue feeling far too clumsy to help form words.

The King's Justice seems so much taller, so much bigger, so much more terrifying, when he's standing over me like this. When I'm on my knees, a rag in one hand and a brush in the other, cleaning the floor. *His* floor.

Something like indignation flares in my chest, and for reasons beyond my comprehension, I rise. I drop the rag and the brush, placing my palms on the rugged, rubber matting, and push myself up to full height, the shackles quietly clanging between my wrists.

Only to realize what a mistake it was.

Not only am I more than a full head shorter than him, but his clothes are clean and look expensive, the dark material fitting like a second skin and exemplifying the muscles of his broad chest. The hilts of two swords peek past his strong shoulders, shifting as he takes a step back. Though I don't see other weapons, I'm sure plenty are hidden on his body—perhaps tucked into the tops of his boots like the bottoms of his loose black pants.

The Justice exudes lethal confidence in a way that both terrifies me and, to my utter disgust, stirs an ineffable excitement deep in my core.

I force myself to look up.

A faint shadow accentuates the strong, clenched jaw—free of blood, fresh or otherwise—and his dark hair is mussed as if he's run his hand through it a hundred times already.

His hateful gaze studies my face as I study his, though it feels as if he's looking right into my soul.

I swallow.

His eyes slide down to my throat.

Fear claws its way through the heat growing in my core, mixing with repulsion and self-loathing when I remember it was Shelley's blood on that handsome face. Did he drink right from her torn stomach? Is he looking at my neck and thinking about what it would be like to drink my blood, too?

He's no different from the wolves who attacked us that night. Those shifters who cannibalize their own kind as if nothing else matters but their own greed.

When he dips his head ever so slightly, taking in the ratty, torn clothes on my body, my dirt-crusted nails, my fraying shoes, and my bound hands, I bite my lip to keep the warmth from flushing my cheeks.

It's not as if the Dracori have given us baths or clothes or even a hairbrush in the dungeon, but he probably doesn't know that. With his pristine gear, perfectly tousled hair, and overwhelming air of arrogance, he likely doesn't even know where the dungeons are.

I steel my spine and clench my fists to keep from saying something I would definitely regret, trying to think of a reasonable question instead of an insult to hurl.

Before I decide on what to ask, the two Dracori rush past us. They leave the training room in such a flurry, the breeze from their exit pulls strands of my hair along with disrupting pieces of his, revealing more of the scar knotting from his forehead down to the bottom of his left eyebrow.

The King's Justice inhales sharply, his broad chest rising with the sudden motion. I nearly jump back, the chain of my shackles clanging as I just manage to stay my ground. His nostrils flare. His eyes widen. He works his jaw, lips curling at the edges as he fails to resist a sneer.

The spark of indignation in my chest flares into a fire. Maybe he should consider speaking with his uncle to petition for better treatment of prisoners if he doesn't want to smell how disgusting we are. Even one visit to a bathing chamber would make a difference.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from scoffing.

Or maybe he should teach his Dracori to imprison only those who have actually committed crimes.

He inhales again, looking as if he's itching to cover his nose, eyes glittering with unadulterated abhorrence.

Do I smell so bad that he might truly kill me over poor hygiene?

I should leave to avoid further offending him with my revolting scent, but I don't want to risk any chances of an appeal with the Dracori Captain. It's insane to risk my *life* before risking my freedom, but the thought of being locked forever—controlled forever—makes me steel my spine and square my shoulders even in the face of the bloodthirsty dragon shifter.

"Do—" I start asking for permission to leave.

"Never mind." He growls low and deep, then turns on his heels and leaves the training room in a few long strides.

I blink at the empty space where he stood mere heartbeats ago.

Skies, the man moves fast.

Looking down at the limp rag and discarded brush, I shrug and loose a long sigh of relief. It feels like I can't breathe when he's around; like his presence alone weighs on my entire being. Like he has his own gravitational force pulling me to him all the while my instinct screams to run the other way as fast as I can.

The Dracori who brings me back to the dungeon is one I've met before—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say she's one I've *seen* before, since I've never actually spoken to any of them—and I consider the consequences of asking whether she has news of my cellmates.

But my heart hammers just at the thought of talking to her, which doesn't make sense when just hours ago, I nearly asked a question to *the King's Justice*. Surely, compared to the only surviving dragon shifter, a mere Dracori should be easy to talk to?

She opens the bars, and I step in. As we crouch for her to remove my shackles, I decide I can't ask her about the others because I'm not sure I can handle the answer, especially if she's going to tell me they're not coming back. A rush of guilt washes over me when I realize I don't even care whether they were pardoned. I just don't want to be alone.

The guard closes the door at the top of the stairs when she leaves, and I lie on my straw bed, adding today's meals to my markings on the wall. Dropping the chip of stone, I turn to the other markings and brush my fingers over the existing etches. Like mine, they appear to count something. But surely not the days the prisoner spent here? The tallies cover a vast expanse of the stone, and my heart hurts at the thought that someone might have been here for months—maybe even years. Maybe many, many years.

Only minutes have passed, but the silence is already deafening.

Tears prick the corners of my eyes.

Someone groans.

I laugh. Then the tears stream down my face.

Someone else bawls, their crying louder and deeper than mine.

Another sob joins.

And another.

The cacophony of our collective sorrow echoes in the dungeon, a song I never wanted to know.

We weep, together yet alone in our individual grief.

The sound of shuffling and slamming metal jolts me awake. I stare at the bars, disoriented, my mind unable to process what my eyes are seeing.

"What?" Mariette asks gruffly, shaking her wrists and dropping to her bed. With a quick glance at the two untouched meals on the ground, she says, "If you're not going to eat that, I will. Both of them."

I rub my eyes and wince, my face still puffy and sensitive from having cried myself to sleep. "You…What happened?"

Mariette gives me a pointed look before tilting her head at the Dracori already climbing the stairs. I nod, taking my bowl from her as she digs into her own.

Once the dungeon's door slams closed, I immediately ask again.

But the reply I receive is not from Mariette.

"We appealed. Our appeals were denied. We were sentenced. What's there to know?" Kieran's voice is even rougher than Mariette's, but my heart does the stupidest little flutter.

Mariette and Kieran came back. They're *back*.

Two out of four isn’t so bad.

“But…why?” I can’t stop the grin on my face, so I lift the bowl of gruel to hide it.

The panther shifter furrows her brow and jerks a thumb at the bars. “Because I’d rather be in here than out there.”

“What was your sentence?” I ask. Her sombre response stifles my enthusiasm, but not my glee. “Why didn’t she listen to your appeal?”

“Because she’s a power-hungry Dracori who loves to revel in everyone else’s misery,” scoffs Kieran. “Skies, I hope a cat pees on her armour.”

Mariette rolls her eyes and blows a strand of brown hair from her face, dropping the spoon back into her gruel. “When they say she’ll listen to your appeal, what they mean is you’ll get to stand there and talk while she sleeps with her eyes open. She doesn’t ask any questions. Doesn’t even pay attention. At the end of it all, she glances at the reason for your apprehension and gives you a sentence she deems fitting.”

Kieran scoffs again. “An arbitrary sentence. But you could have done better with your appeal.”

“I didn’t realize you knew such big words,” Mariette says with a bittersweet smile. “Maybe you should have used some in yours.”

A low growl ripples through the cells, but it carries no bite.

“So…” I purse my lips, trying to quell rising excitement at the potential for company again. “What now?”

She sighs, balancing her bowl on one knee as she rests her head against the wall. “Now we wait, I guess.”

“They’ll give us opportunities soon enough,” Kieran says.

At my confusion, Mariette says, “That’s what they call the tasks you can pick up to lessen your sentence. Opportunities.”

Her green eyes narrow at the last word.

“How long did you get?” I ask.

“For the unsuccessful theft of royal property”—Mariette rolls her eyes when Kieran coughs—“we were all given the choice of six years in the dungeon, with the option to reduce the sentence through successful opportunities, or two years with the Watchers at the front lines.”

“I figure my chances of reducing my sentence are better than surviving two years against the Rebels. You saw what those wolves did?” Kieran makes a sound of disgust. “I never want to see that again.”

I shiver at the memory. I also hope never to see something like that again, but the image of the King's Justice fills my mind's eye, his bloody face reminding me those wolves aren't the only ones to fear.

A few days later, when the Dracori give us our daily tasks, two women approach the bars of our cell. If I weren't already standing, I might have jumped from my straw bed in anticipation; is it finally time for my appeal?

"I have an opportunity. I need two shifters." She looks down at the parchment in her hand. "Successful aid and survival will take one day off your sentence."

Mariette stirs, but she doesn't speak.

From the next cell, Kieran asks, "What's the opportunity? What do we have to do?"

A small smile spreads on the Dracori's face, chasing away her expression of ennui. "That's not on my list. All I know is they want two. Once you are enlisted for the opportunity, you will be informed of what you need to know as you need it."

"Can you at least tell us whether it's something with the King's Justice?" asks another prisoner whose voice I've heard, but with whom I've never interacted.

She nods. "That, I can do. You will not be working with the King's Three, nor will you be in close proximity to the Justice or Lords Maverik and Greyson."

"Sign me up," says the prisoner.

The other guard moves out of sight from my cell, and I hear shuffling followed by the now-familiar click of silencing cuffs.

Kieran grunts. "Me too."

I turn to Mariette with unvoiced questions. She shrugs as both men are led up the stairs.

Mariette and I are brought to shovel manure and clean the stables at the far side of the grounds. We're mostly left on our own except for the

occasional stable hand walking through as we work side by side, making progress on each stall. Despite the silence, we quickly fall into an efficient, rhythmic pattern.

By midday, I can't hold it in any longer.

Checking to make sure no one is close enough to hear, I lean over to Mariette's side of the stall. She pauses in her sweeping and looks at me with a raised brow.

"Why didn't you go with them?" I ask, peering around once more for potential eavesdroppers.

"She said only two." The panther shifter turns back to her pile of hay.

"But you could have volunteered before Kieran. Or even that other guy." I step closer.

She doesn't add distance between us, but she gives me a hard look.

"Was it because the reward is only one day off of your six years?" I press. Since her return, we've been paired for a few tasks, and despite her general reticence to talk, she's warmed up to me enough that I'm confident in my questioning.

Mariette turns slowly to me, eyebrows lifted and lips slightly curled in amusement.

"It is very little time in comparison." I lean on my broom, considering my own options even though the Dracori Captain still hasn't reached out for my appeal. "Do you think I'll be offered opportunities if I get a sentence like yours?"

"As a shiftless?" Mariette mirrors my position, though she leans on the stall's wall, crossing her arms over the broom handle. It warms my heart that she considers my question seriously. It's not obvious whether a person is shiftless or a shifter—we don't have any markings or anything—but sometimes people can tell when you've been beaten by life in a way that rarely happens to shifters. Mariette didn't seem to care at all. In fact, only Wickham and Hartley made faces, though Wickham was much quicker to hide it. For all of Kieran's nastiness, at least I don't have to add that to the list.

"I'm not sure, actually." She runs a hand through her short hair, tugging at the ends. "Maybe it was because only shifters were present at the appeal, but I didn't get the sense they would request shiftless often. Though, I noticed the Dracori this morning specifically requested shifters, so perhaps I am wrong."

I nod and smile, but my stomach curdles, threatening to add my lunch to what we have to clean. I'd noticed the specific language as well, but I don't have high hopes.

Mariette returns to sweeping, but I can't take my mind off her reaction this morning; something in her green eyes makes me think she's not telling me everything.

After another moment, the panther shifter sighs. "Speak."

I tighten my grip on the broom handle. "What do you mean?"

"You're being incredibly bothersome."

In my periphery, she turns to face me fully, pulling her broom to one side and placing the other hand on her hip. Depending on the mood of the Dracori of the day, our shackles are sometimes separated—the cuffs still firmly on our wrists, but the chain between them unlocked—for ease of mobility when doing our tasks under the assumption no one would be stupid enough to attempt an escape from the king's own castle. Today is one of those lucky days when our hands aren't bound, and it successfully contributes to Mariette's intimidation effort.

I gasp. "What? I'm not even saying anything!"

"You're stopping and starting and gazing into space." She cocks an eyebrow, staring pointedly at my little pile of hay.

I follow her gaze and purse my lips. "I've just been pushing things back and forth, haven't I?"

"The less work you do, the more I have to pick up. So whatever is distracting you, out with it."

"Why didn't you take the opportunity?" I hold her green gaze.

"I already told you."

I shake my head. "I suggested the reward wasn't enough in comparison to your six years. You didn't confirm it."

Mariette's lips curl slowly into a small smile. "More observant than you look, hm?"

It's my turn to lift an eyebrow. "That depends on how observant you think I look."

For the first time since meeting her, Mariette tilts her head back and laughs. It's not a big laugh, and certainly not a belly-laugh, but it's infectious all the same. Despite my current situation being more dire than I've ever experienced, I savour the feeling of finally having someone to share chatter and laughs with.

“Fair enough.” She shakes her head and settles, but the ghost of her smile remains. “I just don’t want to draw attention to myself, Scarlet. Do you?”

I shrug, picking at the handle. “I keep telling myself I have a chance at successfully arguing for my freedom, but with each passing day, I’m starting to realize I might have to face the reality of being a prisoner indefinitely.”

Twisting my hands, the disconnected chains of my cuffs clink as I push the broom around. Mariette doesn’t respond, so I continue.

“Before this all happened, I had…I was really close to having earned my freedom.” Swallowing the growing lump in my throat, I look up at the stable ceiling, counting the wooden beams. “I, uh. My parents—I’m adopted—they had a lot of gambling debts.”

She nods, saying bitterly, “Them and a third of Selerune, huh?”

I laugh, the sound a harsh, quiet bark echoing in the stable. “Yeah. Well, an unfortunate accident claimed both their lives, leaving me and my siblings scrambling to pay off their debts. Things weren’t so bad when they were around, but once they all shifted and left for better prospects, it got hard to keep up with the payments, you know? And then it became clear I wasn’t going to shift, so…” I shrug, though the motion feels too small for the memories clawing through my vulnerability. Sighing, I shake my head to clear at least some of the dark clouds. “Well, I fought for a few years. For the debt collector, I mean, as entertainment. Worked it off through time in the ring against other shiftless fighters. That night, I was on my way back after having finally paid off my debt. And now I’m here.”

I look down at the cuffs on my wrists, resting my cheek on the wooden handle of my broom.

“You didn’t even get one night of freedom.”

“No, I didn’t.”

The panther shifter takes a deep breath, blowing her cheeks out as she releases it. “I guess it makes sense why you can’t fathom why I wouldn’t want to work toward mine. It’s just that for me…” Mariette shakes her head. “I just don’t need that attention. But I understand why you would.”

The smile we share is a sad one, and though a part of me is still curious about her reasons—still can’t understand them—my heart feels too raw, too much like my mind has been dragged over hot coals, and I can’t bring myself to continue the conversation.

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CHAPTER

TWELVE

The stable is located at one of the farthest corners from the palace, which sits in the middle of the long rectangular grounds of Selerune Castle. Various outcroppings of trees provide shade for the area, and though it has not been kept in the best of conditions, it's still a decent spot to take the occasional break.

By now, I'm no longer surprised by the state of the back buildings on these royal grounds. Once we started working, it quickly became clear that, like Selerune as a kingdom, things here only look shiny and pristine from afar.

The sun hangs low in the sky on its way to the horizon when Mariette and I rise from our seats on the shaded grass, grab the last bags of trash, and make our way toward the collection site behind the stable. I've yet to be assigned garbage duty, and I pray to the skies that particular task continues to evade me.

Just before we turn, voices drift around the corner. Mariette stops me in my tracks by raising a hand without looking back, her eyes staying trained ahead.

I shuffle forward to get a closer look, but she whips her head back to me, glancing from my face to the chains hanging from my wrists.

My mouth opens in understanding as I notice she holds both her chains in one hand, and I slowly do the same. Mariette nods and tilts her head. Carefully setting our bags down, we flatten ourselves against the stable's exterior wall and inch toward the voices.

Being the shorter one, I crouch low to the ground while she rises to her full height, standing over me as we carefully peer around the corner.

Four Dracori stand together just past the stable and near a cluster of trees, deep in conversation. Immediately, we pull back.

Though no one would have suspected anything nefarious from two prisoners hauling garbage the collection site, our presence would have stopped their conversation.

I lay a hand on my chest, feeling the rapid hammering of my heart beneath my palm. Mariette's expression reveals nothing, but thoughts must be whipping through her mind as they do mine.

After a moment, she silently draws my attention, then tilts her head in question. From the glittering in her eyes, eavesdropping is excluded from her desire to avoid attention.

The risk of being spotted is too great, though, so she pulls me back from glancing around the corner again. Instead, we lean as far forward as we dare.

"…not fair. It just doesn't work like it used to," says one man.

"That's not necessarily true," argues another. "They work—when new."

"Same thing."

"…just don't understand why replacements…so hard to get."

"…feels like they're dragging it out," says a feminine voice. "Didn't use to be like this…"

Mariette and I look at each other, then at our wrists—at the dull, black stones embedded in the center of each cuff—and shake our heads. Everyone knows silence stones eventually stop working, but it's never been a big deal for the Dracori; they've always taken great care to ensure stones are replaced well before showing signs of diminishing ability.

"…just the other day…one of them shifted…right in the middle of…"

"…never had such a thing."

"…need more stones…"

"…ridiculous…can't work…"

"…not right…"

"…fading…"

I have a hand clasped over my mouth to keep from gasping. Mariette bears a chilly expression as the Dracori walk toward the front of the stable, their voices fading until we can't hear any more.

Once we're confident they're gone, I rise and turn to her.

We stare wordlessly at each other for a long moment until the wind picks up, ruffling the tops of our garbage bags and threatening to topple

them.

“Did they say what I think they said?” I finally whisper.

Mariette, paler now, swallows and nods.

“Does that mean what I think it means?” I ask.

The shifter lifts her hands. We stare at the small black gems at the center of each cuff. On me, they do nothing. On her, they mean everything.

She closes her hands into fists and narrows her eyes.

I hold my breath.

She releases hers.

“Nothing?” Rasping disappointment threads my voice.

Mariette shakes her head. Both our shoulders drop.

“So…” Mariette bites her lip, looking uncertain for the first time. Today is a day of firsts for our friendship. “Either silence stones are running out of power faster than expected, or there’s a shortage.”

I run a finger over the rough surface of the black jewel on my cuff. Unlike the stones in the cells, which are pried out and replaced when they run out of power—evident from the scoring in the stone around them—when shackles become useless, they’re thrown out.

“We’re not that lucky,” I say with a weak smile. “It would have been too easy if your stones needed replacing.”

“If we were, we wouldn’t be here, would we?” Her green eyes wrinkle at the corners as she tugs a hand through her short hair.

“Maybe that’s where Kieran is,” I blurt.

“Where?”

“Helping with this silence stone shortage?” My tone rises by the last word, making the entire statement sound like a question. “But would that make sense? Because why would the reward for the opportunity be only one day?”

“Maybe.”

Mariette doesn’t seem convinced.

After our evening bowls of gruel, I roll from my back to my side, trying to get comfortable; I’d added Hartley’s straw to my pile. For once, the dungeon is entirely empty of prisoners except for me and Mariette.

The dungeon’s entrance creaks open, and heavy footsteps echo down the stairs.

Without rising, I ask into the air, “Kieran? Is that you? Are you back already?”

I count the damp spots on the ceiling of the cell, rolling my hips once more to flatten a particularly lumpy piece of straw. Mariette shuffles on her side, likely also trying to find a comfortable position, as we had shared the remains of Hartley’s bed to bolster our own.

“Aren’t prisoners allowed their own cells?”

That voice…

A chill crashes over me. My body goes rigid, then I jump up so fast, I nearly lose my balance when I rise to face the person who spoke.

Maverik and Greyson—or I suppose, *Lord Maverik and Lord Greyson*, according to their proper titles—stand in front of the bars, heads each tilted one way, their hair brighter despite the darkness of the dungeon.

Between them is the man I’d hoped never to see again. The monster whose face I still can’t forget.

At night, he haunts my dreams. In the day, I fear his presence at every corner.

The King’s Justice looks from me to the pile of straw at my feet. His nose wrinkles in disgust; I bite my tongue and swallow a retort.

“Are they?” Maverik asks again, his head tilting the other way before looking at his silver-haired cousin.

Greyson studies the bars and reaches for the papers I know are clipped to the board hanging on the wall between the cells, answering absentmindedly, “No, usually not.”

“Who’s Kieran?” the Justice asks, voice barely audible over his growl.

In my periphery, Mariette stiffens.

I resist the urge to fidget, curling my hands into fists at my side as I clench my jaw to keep from asking what they want. They’ve not visited the dungeon in the entire time we’ve been imprisoned; I fear my strange encounter with the Justice in the training room might have reminded them of our existence.

Are they here to watch us like entertainment? To see the squalor of prisoners so they can better revel in their own riches?

Greyson glances at the Justice with a raised brow before flipping the page and looking at Kieran’s empty cell.

“Says here he’s a bear shifter.” Greyson flips another page, eyebrows rising. “Hm. He and his friends tried—and failed—to rob one of the caches.”

“Why are we here, Kane?” Maverik peers over Greyson’s shoulder before grabbing the page listing my information along with Mariette’s. She’s so motionless at my side, I’m not sure she’s even breathing anymore.

“What’s her note say?” asks the Justice without taking his oppressive gaze from mine.

“Just the usual stuff. Why are you so interested?” Maverik answers with a question of his own, resting an arm over Greyson’s shoulder.

Greyson looks from me, Mariette, and his cousins before glancing at me once more, his eyes—silver-grey in the dungeon’s light—almost as intense as the Justice’s golden ones. But where it feels like that heated amber burns right through me, the wolf shifter studies me as if trying to figure something out.

“What does it say?” The Justice grinds out each word through clenched teeth, and his eyes narrow when Mariette and I flinch.

“She’s a shiftless who set her town on fire.” Maverik shrugs, waving the paper in the air.

“That’s it?”

I don’t know the King’s Justice, and he doesn’t know me. Yet when he utters those two words, they become a spear lancing pain through my heart.

That’s it?

That’s how the world views me, but more importantly, that’s how I view myself. No matter how hard I try, I can’t escape the shadow of doubt clinging to me like an oily film of inferiority I can’t wash away.

I’m not a shifter. End of story. End of opportunities. I’m shiftless, and *that’s it*.

I can’t explain the next words that come out of my mouth, but before I know it, I’ve taken a step forward. “I did not set fire to Grengrove.”

My voice is clear, steady, and startles both me and the Justice. His eyes widen for a mere heartbeat before he schools his expression into calm nothingness, devoid of even contempt and disdain.

It only irritates me further.

Even when hiding his disgust behind a stoic countenance, I feel the heat of his anger.

I'd never met this man before that night; what right does he have to hate me, when he didn't even know I'm shiftless? What right does he have to look at me with eyes that burn with a hatred I can't understand? A hatred he doesn't seem inclined to explain?

"I was framed for it, and I haven't even had the chance to explain," I continue. Though my fists are clenched and shaking, my voice remains strong. I let my tone and my words build a shield around my bruised heart, protecting me from the world I live in—the world that hates me for something I can't change. "I've been here for days, scrubbing your toilets, planting your flowers, trimming your hedges, and shovelling your *horse shit* as punishment for something I didn't do, and that's not even the actual punishment yet!"

My entire body is taut with tension, the words coursing through my boiling veins as fury spews from my lips. I take a step forward, feeling as though it's a step toward sealing my unfortunate fate. But I can't stop.

"I did nothing to deserve this. Nothing! And yet I'm in here, and you're out there. I'm cleaning garbage like *I'm* garbage, and this is before I'm even sentenced—because skies knows your Dracori Captain is just going to tune out my appeal anyway—so am I to expect worse? Is the worse yet to come? Is it because I'm not a shifter? Is that why no one cares?"

Greyson raises an eyebrow, mouth slightly open. The sheet of parchment drops from Maverik's hand, floating soundlessly to the ground as his lips slowly widen into a grin.

My chest heaves with each breath, but nothing cools the rage writhing in my heart as I match the heat of the Justice's glare with fires of my own. Whatever he came down here for, whatever he wanted to be entertained by, I hope I ruined it for him.

I hope I ruined his day.

He clenches his jaw as if only by gritting his teeth will he keep his dragon's fire in—keep from burning me to a crisp.

For a tense moment, no one moves. No one so much as breathes.

Then the King's Justice turns and walks away.

Mariette starts to sigh, but she straightens at the bark of Maverik's laugh.

Greyson wears a weary smile. They both turn and, with their hands on their hips, watch their dark-haired cousin storm toward the bottom of the stairs before shaking their heads in unison and following.

The King’s Three leaves, and I finally let out a breath.

But in my mind, their footsteps ring louder with each passing second, and suddenly, the echo of their departure sounds too much like the departure of my best chance at freedom.

I take one, two steps toward the door.

My heart pounds erratically, beating so fast, it might even leap out of my chest, fly through the bars, and chase down the men itself.

Mariette grabs my elbow, but I shrug her off and slam my hand against a bar. The little bones at the bottom of my palm vibrate from the impact, the rough metal scraping my skin; I feel neither as I strike the bars once more, this time with both hands.

The hollow banging fills the dungeon.

Greyson pauses. Maverik slows.

The King’s Justice continues heading for the stairs.

“Hey!” I don’t care if panic seeps into my voice.

“Stop!” I don’t care if I sound hopeless and stupid.

The panther shifter grabs me again, her fingers digging into my arm hard enough to bruise. She hisses, “Stop that right now!”

I ignore her and slam my other hand against the bars.

“Hey!” I don’t care if everyone can hear how desperate I sound.

Because I am desperate.

I’m desperate to never again be under someone else’s control.

I’m desperate to make my own choices.

I’m desperate to finally live my life for me.

The fair-haired cousins glance at each other. Mariette yanks me to the side, but I wrench myself from her grip and wrap my hands around the bars, refusing to be pulled away.

“Turn around!” I rattle the bars of my cage; they’re installed securely and don’t show signs of dislodging, but they’ve also been shaken enough times to clatter loudly.

Maverik and Greyson turn, their matching eyes bright with interest.

But it’s not just their attention I need.

I need all three of them.

“I want an opportunity with you!”

The King’s Justice finally stops.

Achingly slow, the dragon shifter turns until he faces me from the other side of the dungeon.

I swallow.

I have no idea what he's going to do.

I have no idea what *I'm* going to do.

I didn't plan on this. I hadn't wanted to see him here—hadn't wanted to see him at all—but then I couldn't bear the sight of him leaving.

My blood thunders in my ears, but Hartley's high voice is loud in my mind.

"If you can survive an assignment with them, you're given an automatic full pardon. A completely clean slate. And you're given a mark that frees you from condemnation for ten years. Ten. Whole. Years."

The Justice narrows his eyes.

An automatic full pardon.

He shoulders past his cousins.

A completely clean slate.

He walks toward my cell.

A mark that frees you from condemnation for ten years.

In one, two strides, he stops in front of the bars.

If you can survive…

I can survive.

I've survived everything life has thrown me so far, and I will survive this, too.

I take another step forward. If it weren't for the bars between us, we would be chest to chest—except with our height difference, I'm level with his chest and he has to look down. Warmth radiates from his body, licking my skin even through my clothes and threatening to set me on fire. I shiver, disgusted at myself for the fleeting wonder of what that heat would feel like on top of me. If, instead of these bars, his strong arms were the ones caging me in.

"What could you possibly contribute to an assignment of ours?" His deep voice wraps around my throat like black silk lined with gold thread, tightening until I shake all thoughts of insanity from my head.

His cousins flank him, each looking at me with a raised brow. Maverik, slightly taller than the other two, looks as if he can barely keep from smiling as he props his elbow up on the Justice's shoulder.

Mariette has slunk so far into the cell, pressed herself so flat against the back wall, I can't even see her from the corners of my eyes.

But I know even she is waiting for my answer.

“I…I can contribute however you see fit,” I say. “Whatever you need, I can do it.”

He narrows his eyes, tilting his head. “What compels you to offer your life with such abandon?”

I purse my lips and shake my head. “Whatever you need. I can do it.”

“You have heard of what happens to those who come with us?” Maverik speaks without malice or amusement; he asks the question as a fact.

With a shuddering breath, I nod.

“So again I ask, little shiftless,” the Justice says, regarding me with intense, unfounded contempt, “just why are you offering your life? What are you hoping to gain?”

I scoff, ignoring Greyson’s eyebrows lifting high on his forehead. “Exactly that, *Justice*. I want my life back.”

From somewhere behind me, Mariette inhales sharply.

“If I recall your shrill screeches correctly, you haven’t even received your sentence yet,” the Justice answers.

Maverik leans forward, glancing at the sheet on the wall. “That’s right.”

Willing my breaths to stabilize, I lift my chin. “As I’ve said, it’s clear I’m no one’s priority. So, I’m taking matters into my own hands. I’m not risking control of my life to someone else. Someone who doesn’t care.”

The Justice lifts a dark brow. “But you’re willing to risk your life on an assignment with us?”

I tilt my head back and square my shoulders to look him in the eyes as I speak. “At least my life will be in my hands. This way, I’m the one deciding to risk it. I know no one has ever returned from an opportunity with you three. I know, and I don’t care. Because this is my choice. It’s my life to risk, especially if it means I can have my freedom—my *life*—back. I don’t want to be under anyone’s control ever again.”

Mere heartbeats stretch into years.

Then he laughs—actually laughs—at me. The deep and rich sound presses against my heart like the walls that I often imagine are closing in on me.

Heat rises all over my body, flushing my cheeks with embarrassment.

Maverik lifts his arm from his cousin’s shoulder and takes a step back, looking between me and the Justice. Greyson’s brows knit together as he crosses his arms.

“Just what do you think you can do that we can’t?” the Justice sneers. “What can you provide that we don’t already have?”

He drags his eyes down my body, painting me with his disdain. I want to claw those amber irises right out of his face.

I swallow, but my mouth feels too dry, so I lick my lips instead.

His gaze darts to my mouth. I bare my teeth.

Maverik snickers from his left.

“I’m…” I exhale. The nearly forgotten incident rises from the back of my memories, rearing to be spoken. The words sound unbelievable even as they roll around in my mind.

I’d thought it was a mistake. Then I’d thought it was mere chance—a stroke of luck given by the skies. Then I’d tried to cast it from my mind forever.

But now, it may be the only key I have to getting out of here.

The Justice lifts a brow, impatience dragging his mouth into a frown.

With a deep breath, I force myself to say it. “I don’t get hurt the way I should.”

His face pinches in confusion, eyes flitting over my body as if the answer were written on my clothes. Maverik crosses and uncrosses his arms, tilting his head while Greyson lifts a hand to his chin. All my anger abandons me.

“…Explain,” the Justice finally grits out.

“I…uh.” Swallowing once more, I clear my throat in another attempt to speak past the rising lump of uncertainty. “I don’t get hurt the way you would expect, I guess.”

Mariette shifts into my periphery, but she quickly darts back into the shadows of our cell. My hands pick at a loose thread on my shirt.

“And just how would we expect you to get hurt?” Greyson asks much gentler than his cousin.

“Right.” I nod a little too emphatically, the adrenaline making my head whirl as I face the possibility of finally leaving this cage. “That’s a fair question. I noticed I don’t really get hurt—I mean, when someone hits me, like with fists or something, I get hurt. But when someone…”

I curse myself trembling, so I take a deep breath and wrap my arms around my body. Telling them this—telling the King’s Justice this—could make things much worse, because it means telling them exactly how to hurt me.

“When someone shifts or are, I think, using their shifter magic, it doesn’t hurt me as much.” Three pairs of eyes look at me as if I’ve suddenly grown two heads, so I try again. “When the Dracori apprehended me that first night—wrongful apprehension, by the way, because I didn’t do it—it was a townsfolk who found me and dragged me to the Dracori. The townie was a shifter, and I guess I was stronger than him, because he tapped into his animal’s magic and his claws came out. Except the claws didn’t…claw me,” I say lamely, forcing my hands to stay still.

“His grip didn’t hurt you?” Greyson asks carefully.

“Ah, well. I mean, I felt the force of his hold. I felt his fingers digging into my skin. But that’s just it. I felt his *hand and his fingers*—not his paw and claws. I saw magic whirling, but I didn’t feel it.” I pause to study their reactions. Do I tell them what happened before that night?

The Justice blinks in disbelief. I steel my spine and continue.

“And before that, I fought a bear shifter—”

“What do you mean you *fought* a bear shifter?” the Justice demands with narrowed eyes and an unpleasant sneer.

A familiar, ugly urge rises. The urge to shrink into myself and take less space.

But I didn’t commit the crime the Dracori claim I’d committed.

I’m locked in a dungeon.

I’m here against my will.

Squaring my shoulders and looking at each of the Three, I steady my voice.

“I fought a bear shifter. It was at The Cage—the fighting ring of a money lender who owns a gambling establishment. He puts on fights between the shiftless, and people bet—”

“If only the shiftless fight, then how did you fight a bear shifter?” Suspicion fills the Justice’s voice, and frustration ekes into mine.

“Because he wanted me to!” I say, exasperated. Doesn’t he understand this is exactly why I’m willing to risk death for freedom? “Because I’d been winning too much and—look, that’s not the point. Spencer wanted to up the excitement. I was the excitement. Samyel was the upping. The point is, I fought a bear shifter, and while I barely survived, I’d survived.”

The growl from his chest ripples in the small distance between us. Greyson shoves an arm in front of the Justice, pushing his own shoulder in

front of his cousin and shielding me from his cousin's intensity. When he turns a weary smile to me, I choke down a sob at the kindness.

"He was silenced, surely?" Greyson asks.

I shake my head, taking breath after breath and frantically counting numbers in my head until I trust myself to talk again. "I don't know if he was allowed to shift or use his shifter magic, but no one stopped him when he did. And well, his claws didn't slice me. Didn't break skin."

"And then?"

"And then I got lucky. I won."

"And you didn't feel the shifter magic? Didn't feel the claws and teeth of his shifted form?" Greyson's eyebrows draw together as the Justice nudges him aside.

"Not when he attacked, no."

The Justice scoffs and takes a step back, dragging a hand through his inky hair.

Maverik allows the ghost of a grin to cross his face before blinking it away. "Show us."

Greyson straightens without bothering to hide his smile, but the Justice snaps his head to the wolf shifter.

"What—"

"Show us what you mean," Maverik prompts again.

The Justice glowers at his cousin. Greyson quickly wipes the smirk from his face.

"I—how?" My heart pounds even harder; even if the Three don't kill me, my racing heart surely will give out, anyway. I glance at Mariette, who's still pale and stone-faced at the other end of the cell. Will they remove her cuffs and make her attack me?

Maverik leans on the bars and shrugs.

The Justice doesn't move.

Greyson shakes his head at his fair-haired cousin. Pointing at him, he says, "You really ought to think before you speak." Then he turns his assessing gaze to me as he reaches to open the door. "You'll come with us. We'll go to the training room, where you can show us what you mean. Exactly what you mean."

"Yes…" The Justice narrows his eyes. "Exactly what you mean."

I glance back at the panther shifter, but she refuses to look at me and keeps her gaze trained on the ground. With a sigh, I turn to Greyson and

nod.

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CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

The walk through the palace to the training room is heavy with silence as I trail behind the three tall men. Maverik and Greyson flank the Justice on either side, and though we pass many Dracori and even more servants, no one dares speak to any of them. The bravest glance at me with questioning eyes, but the Justice and his cousins don't bother even to look back.

When we arrive at the training room's entrance, the Justice pushes the doors with more force than necessary. The double doors slam open, crashing against the internal walls. Every occupant freezes, wide eyes turning to us.

Maverik drawls, "Give us the room."

He didn't have to say anything; half the people have already left, and the other half are well on their way to sprinting out by the time he's spoken the last syllable.

Greyson closes the door behind us, and while I don't hear the click of a lock, I can't shake the feeling of being trapped with three men who suddenly seem a lot bigger than they did earlier.

Maverik tilts his head toward the ring in the centre of the room and I follow, staring at my unbound wrists and hating how meek I feel in comparison to the heavy, confident steps of the shifters in front of and behind me.

Like The Cage at Spencer's, this arena is on a raised platform and surrounded by chain-link fencing with at least two gates. Unlike the one I'm used to, this ring is significantly bigger—big enough that I suspect even the larger shifters can comfortably spar.

My blood hums with adrenaline as I step into the arena. It mixes with the fear and doubt, whirling in my head until I have to force myself to breathe just to think.

“This feels awkward,” Maverik says, swinging his arms as the four of us face each other.

The Justice doesn’t speak, seeming content to simply glower at his cousins; I’m just grateful he’s keeping those intense eyes away from me.

Greyson releases a bone-deep sigh of weariness—the kind only an oldest sibling is uniquely experienced for—and takes a step forward. I resist the urge to step back.

“So it sounds like physical assaults affect you normally, but anything further than that, say if I were to…” Greyson lifts a hand and wraps it in magic. Large, sharp claws form at the end of his fingers—deadlier than usual, even for a wolf shifter. He turns to me with a question in his eyes.

I gulp, unable to take my eyes off those lethal weapons. I’d been impressed by that bear Dracori’s precise shifting the night of the attack, but Greyson demonstrates skill leagues beyond. To control one’s magic so only the claws are unsheathed, the rest of his hand utterly untouched, is something I’ve only heard of in rumours and in stories.

Greyson walks toward me, slowly but with intention, as if he’s trying to avoid scaring a frightened animal.

He’s not wrong.

My breath catches in my throat, but I swallow it when the wolf shifter stops directly in front of me. He reaches outward, careful to avoid scratching me with his claws; deliberate in his movements.

“Your hand,” he says gently.

I blink in confusion, but acquiesce.

His large hand closes briefly over mine. Then he releases me, encircling his fingers around my wrist, pulling my arm to him.

“You feel this tug?” he asks.

“Yes.”

He nods, and realization finally dawns upon my tired mind.

I stiffen when he shifts the positioning of his hand so his claws dig into my wrist.

Greyson glances up from studying my skin; he must have noticed my hitched breath and rigid form. “Can you feel this?”

“Um.” I blink, focusing on separating what my eyes notice and what my body feels. I can see his claws. I watch as the sharp points dig into my skin. My mind knows it should hurt—my body already itching to wince—but if I close my eyes, all I feel is pressure. As if he’s curling his human fingers around my wrist, lightly scratching my skin with his nails. Nothing lethal or dangerous about it.

But when I open my eyes, every hair on the back of my neck stands. Because I *see* those claws. They should rip me apart, but they don’t.

“I can feel your fingers. I feel the pressure of your grip and even the scratching of your nails.” I look down at the deadly shifter magic, rumoured to have shredded even the worst criminals with just one swipe. I swallow. “But it’s your human fingers and your human nails.”

Greyson nods as if my vague answer satisfies him. “What about now?”

My eyes widen when bands of silvery magic whirl around his free hand. The claws of the hand holding my wrist disappear while the ones on his other grow; lengthening, sharpening, and becoming more lethal with each passing second. Then he presses those deadly talons against my arm.

I feel the pressure of his fingers—his *human* fingers—as I watch him drag them along my skin, deeper and deeper. My mind keeps expecting pain and blood, but it doesn’t happen. Even as they press harder, dig deeper, my skin doesn’t break.

Blood doesn’t pour. It doesn’t even seep out where the sharpest of his claws meet my arm.

Not a single drop.

“Amazing,” Maverik whispers from my side.

I jump, wincing when my arm nearly rips out of its socket from Greyson’s tight grip. His brows rise, and he releases me immediately.

Beside Maverik stands the Justice, and all three shifters stare down at the red marks on my arm and wrist, bruises sure to develop later.

“You’re strong,” I mutter, shaking my arm and flexing my hand.

“Sorry.” Greyson smiles sheepishly, and I’m almost starstruck by how handsome he is—how handsome they all are. I hadn’t quite noticed before because I was too busy being afraid, but now that he looks almost embarrassed, I hate how obvious it is.

Especially the King’s Justice.

When he doesn’t have blood dripping from his lips.

“Don’t praise him,” Maverik says, magic whirling from his elbow to his arm. “Maybe he’s actually not all that strong after all, and that’s why it doesn’t hurt.”

He pushes Greyson aside; the wolf shifter steps away with a scoff. Maverik takes his cousin’s place and reaches out, human hand hovering just in front of me. I inhale sharply. Three pairs of eyes—two silver-grey and one golden—watch as I drop my hand into Maverik’s outstretched palm.

His fingers wrap around mine, twisting my hand back and forth as he studies it. “Ready?”

For someone so large and so lethal, he’s surprisingly gentle, even going as far as avoiding the red marks Greyson had left. Still, I don’t trust myself to speak, so I nod.

He lifts his other hand, letting me see the magic forming his claws as they extend from each finger. Our eyes meet. I dip my chin slightly.

Maverik slashes my arm.

I gasp and wince at the pain blossoming deep in my bone; has he broken my forearm? The motion was effortless, yet his strength is undeniable, even from such a small strike.

The white-blond wolf shifter winces with me, as if genuinely apologetic. “Guess it wasn’t Greyson.”

I smile weakly, alarm bells ringing in my head at the bizarre situation. Two of the deadliest men in the kingdom—aside from the Justice and the king himself—checking whether their wolves’ claws will break my skin. Checking whether they can hurt me with their shifter magic.

“That hurt, though,” Greyson says, eyes trained on the spotty redness already spreading where Maverik had struck.

My arm throbs. I grit my teeth with a nod and consider how long this will take to heal—because I can’t afford healers—and hope bruised bones won’t stop the Three from letting me join them.

Greyson looks from Maverik’s claws to my skin, his brows furrowed in thought.

“That doesn’t prove anything,” the Justice says gruffly. “Stand over there.”

Greyson and Maverik both shrug. I want to ask the dragon shifter what he means, but can’t bring myself to form the words.

The cousins step aside as the Justice and I head to opposite ends of the ring.

His lips curl into a snarl. A rumble emanates from him, so deep I feel it in the soles of my feet. His fists glow with magic, the silver strands circling his hands and twirling up his arms.

My heart leaps to my throat at the thought of fighting the King's Justice, but my body moves on its own, shifting into my accustomed fighting stance. My fists tremble in front of me. My breaths grow uneven.

"Hey—" Maverik starts.

"You sure—" Greyson says.

The rest of their words are lost to me as my mind empties of thought.

Fear replaces the blood in my veins, freezing my entire body. Terror clutches my heart and my lungs, squeezing until I can't breathe.

I'm rooted in place.

I can't move.

I can't even look away.

I can do nothing but stare at the twin flames—dangerously large and red hot—hurtling toward me.

Heat like I've never known engulfs me completely. It boils my blood. Burns my skin. Ripples over me and through me and inside of me and ignites something in my heart. Except that spark doesn't stop catching fire. It grows and grows and spreads and spreads until I'm entirely scorched. Completely incinerated.

I see only red. I feel only heat.

Until I become the fire.

Until I *am* the inferno.

Just when I am about to succumb to the building eruption, relief washes over me, a torrent of water dousing the flames. Ice spreads under my skin, chasing the blaze still burning bright. Melting the cold. Cooling the hot. Neither wins against the other; instead, the cold and the hot meet in the middle, creating balance. Warmth caresses my heart as comfort flows through my soul, easing its way to each limb until peace settles over me like a thick blanket.

Finally, the roaring in my ears turns quiet, and I'm shocked to still be standing.

Except…everything looks different.

Everything looks…bigger.

I blink and look up.

I look up at the King's Justice, whose wide eyes stare down at me with unmistakable shock. On his left, Maverik's jaw hangs wide open. On his right, Greyson's eyes are so big, they nearly take up half his face.

Why are they so *big*? I feel as if I barely reach their knees, but that can't be right. And the metal fence around the ring has also grown—to the point I'm certain I might even fit through the gaps if I were determined to do so.

Should I do so?

Would I be able to escape while the Three are struck by surprise?

I think better of it and cast another glance at the men. Why *are* they so big?

Has the arena always been this size?

The confusion is overwhelming, pushing away all my previous fear. I open my mouth to speak, but a strange sound comes out.

I didn't think it was possible, but the unbridled shock on all three faces increases, their eyebrows high enough to be hidden by their hair.

I try once more to ask what's happening, but I make that strange sound again.

Tilting my head, I step forward.

Walking feels weird, but I don't pay it much attention because the three most deadly shifters of Selerune collectively step back.

I tilt my head the other way and take another step forward.

They take another step back.

Frustration builds in my chest when my mouth still doesn't make the words I want to ask.

What is that stupid sound I keep making?

A snarl escapes my mouth this time, scaring even me. I hop back, but my feet tangle together, and I trip.

Landing on my backside, I try—and fail—to groan. After briefly considering just lying here and waiting to wake from what must be a horrendous nightmare, I push myself up, and—

When I look down at my hands, they aren't there.

Instead of the normal, human hands I've had my entire life, two small, furry, black paws move when I move. They go where I go.

I look down at my body. Instead of my normal, human body, I see a small, furry, black one, complete with two small, furry, black paws where my feet should be.

Something moves in my periphery, and I snap my head to catch the glimpse of a slender, furry, black tail swishing in the air. I follow the tail down, down, down…to where it connects to my small, furry, black body.

I'm…a cat?

I blink up at the three stunned shifters.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I recognize the feeling of what must be my small, furry, black ears flattening against the top of my small, furry, black head.

The men aren't big.

I'm small.

"*Meow?*" I ask, the sound finally registering in my head as the call of a common wild cat.

Greyson inhales sharply. Maverik's jaw closes only to open again. The Justice blinks back at me.

The longer they stay silent, the more panic grows in my chest. Questions whip through my mind at a breakneck pace as reality sets in.

What happened? How did this happen? Why? How do I turn back? Am I a cat forever?

I stare at paws instead of hands.

I look at the men towering over me.

I feel my…my *tail* swishing behind me.

Can cats hyperventilate? They must be able to, because my breaths come quicker and shorter as a shiver races down my spine. And tail?

The chill enveloping me warms. Heats. Burns.

Hot fire rips through my body before meeting the ice in my veins, creating that neutral balance once more and blocking my vision with red and orange.

When I open my eyes and take a shuddering breath, the Justice, Maverik, and Greyson haven't moved an inch from their positions, and while they are still tall, they're not as big anymore.

I look down at my body—at my *human* body—sitting on the floor of the ring. I lift my arms, and my human hands greet me. My sigh of relief is so sweet to my *human* ears, I nearly sob.

"W-what happened?" I stutter through gasps.

Only silence greets me.

"W-why did I—" My vision blurs with tears, turning everything into blobs of colour.

I wipe the tears that I can't blink away, too overwhelmed to care about the ratty state of my sleeve. I'm just relieved to be back in my own body.

As I stare at my human fingers and study the red marks all along my arm—proving this hasn't all been a fever-induced dream—I can't wrap my mind around what happened.

"What did you do?" I stand and lift my eyes to the Justice's perturbed gaze. "What did you do to me?"

He must have done something. Maybe he used one of the king's artifacts, and I didn't see it. Maybe he'd embedded different magic into those flames. Did he intend for me to live the rest of my life as a common cat, hated by all?

I swallow a cruel laugh. The joke is on him—everyone already hates me. Even my siblings left me.

He has the audacity to look even more shocked; one foot shifts, as if wanting to step back, before he wrangles it under control and keeps it where it is. Then he lifts a hand and points a finger at me. "What did I do? What did *you* do?"

He may have stopped himself from retreating, but I can't.

I stumble and catch myself. "You must have done something to me. One second, your dragon fire was coming at me, then the next, poof!" I throw my hands up for emphasis, my voice rising with each word until I shriek, "I'm a cat!"

Greyson blinks. "You *were* a cat."

Maverik picks his jaw up from the ground. "You're back to being human."

The King's Justice narrows his eyes, wiping all signs of shock from his expression. "I'll ask one more time, Crimson. What did you do?"

Unintelligible sounds escape my mouth. My arms flail. I think I scream.

I just want answers.

The three men stiffen, adjusting their positions beside each other so they face me as one deadly unit. The image should be intimidating. It should scare me.

But when I finally gather my words, all I can shout is, "My name is Scarlet!"

"Tell me, *Crimson*," the Justice growls.

"You tell me!" I shriek.

Greyson’s shoulders drop, tension visibly leaving his body as he puts a hand on his cousin’s shoulder. “I think she really doesn’t know.”

“Of course, I don’t know!” I snap.

Maverik’s eyebrow rises, a smirk forming at his lips as he relaxes, too.

“You’re not seriously going to believe her?” the Justice barks.

Greyson turns a weary smile to the dragon shifter, gesturing with his other hand. “Kane, look at her.”

“Yeah, Kane. Look at her.” Their other cousin snickers and, even while heaving and out of breath, I have the uncomfortable feeling he’s implying something entirely different from what Greyson meant.

My head pounds with every emotion known to the skies. My mouth is as dry as sand. Do I want them to answer me properly? Do I want to know what he did to me? Maybe. Maybe not. I can’t decide.

What I want now is to go back to my uncomfortable, scratchy straw bed. I want to sleep all night, and then sleep into the next day. But I can’t do that, because if I go back to that horrendous excuse for a bed and sleep, it means nothing will change. It means the Dracori will still force me awake tomorrow morning. I will still get an assignment to do the worst of the worst of the castle’s tasks. I will still have to wait for my sentence. I will still risk losing my freedom.

A deep-throated growl yanks me out of my spiral, dropping me back to the present. My eyes meet his intense ambers, and I flinch, looking at the rough floor instead.

“You say you’re shiftless?” Greyson asks.

I nod as I gently rub the bruises forming on my arm, testing the tenderness.

“Hmm.”

“What aren’t you saying?” I whisper hoarsely, quietly savouring the way the words feel on my tongue now that the initial flurry of panic has passed. I never thought I’d ever appreciate simply being able to speak; shifters can’t talk in their animal forms, though the ones who have bonded well with their animals can understand our language enough to communicate in their own ways. Once I’d given up on ever shifting, I never wondered again how I’d communicate.

Something clicks in my mind, and I pause.

“Um…”

Three pairs of eyes pin me in place.

I shuffle my weight from one foot to the other.

“Did I…” My cheeks flush with heat that has nothing to do with the traumatic transformation. “Did I…shift? Is that what a shift is like?”

I hate the tremor of hope that slips into my voice. I’d stopped hoping to shift a long time ago. I’d accepted my fate. So why does a part of me still want to fit in? To be part of them?

The pity in their eyes hurts more than any strike I’ve ever received. It hurts more than the freedom I lost the same night I thought I’d finally gained it. It hurts in a way I never knew I could hurt.

My eyes burn with shame and embarrassment as I turn them downward, focusing on the toes of my old boots. I bite my lip hard enough to hurt. Hard enough to taste blood.

“Never mind,” I whisper, steadying the heart I hadn’t realized could still be broken further.

Something ruffles ahead of me, but I don’t look up. I can’t look up yet. I focus on deep breaths until a loud thump sounds.

I blink, trying to understand the scene.

Maverik smiles brightly at me, one arm looped around the Justice’s bicep as if holding him back. The Justice rubs his chin with his free hand, moving his jaw back and forth while grumbling. Greyson flexes his hand and shakes it in the air with a curse. When he notices me, the wolf shifter turns to face me fully, tucking his hand behind his back and smiling as brightly as Maverik.

It’s all strange enough that I can’t help but laugh.

But the laugh comes out wrong, because both wolves’ smiles freeze, their eyebrows drawing together in what looks like concern. The Justice shakes Maverik off, running his tongue over his teeth with a grimace before releasing a deep sigh.

“Unfortunately, I do not believe that was a shift,” Greyson says gently. His kindness makes me feel worse. “However, I also don’t think you’re shiftless.”

I pull my head back. “What?”

The silver-haired man nods slowly. “You’re not a shifter, but you’re not shiftless, either. I don’t know for sure just yet—I’ll have to look into it.”

His words steal the breath right from my lungs. If not shifter nor shiftless, then what am I? I force myself to avoid that thought. Whatever

this is—whatever I am—it's not something I can do anything about right now.

Instead, I ask, "What about the opportunity?"

Maverik tilts his head. "What opportunity?"

"The assignment she wants to go on." The dragon shifter turns his hard, golden gaze to his cousin. He grits out through his teeth, "With us."

Hope withers in my chest when Maverik and Greyson share an uneasy glance. I thought they, the kinder and funnier of the Three, would have been easier to convince of my usefulness in comparison to their cousin's seemingly endless hatred of me.

An unspoken conversation happens between the three men.

I lick my bottom lip, wincing at the taste of metallic blood.

The Justice grumbles something under his breath, turning from us to face the back wall of the training room. As if he can't even look at me anymore.

Good.

I don't want to look at him, either.

Maverik's smile returns, though it's a little more sombre.

Greyson's eyes—dark grey, either by the lighting or whatever conclusion he and his cousins just reached—land on me. With a heavy sigh, he says, "You can come with us."

"We leave now," the Justice says over his shoulder.

My heart soars until I remember something else.

Then guilt crashes into me in waves for having forgotten at all.

"And Mariette," I say.

The Justice whips around, golden eyes bright with anger. "No."

"She needs to come, too." I steel my spine and lift my chin.

I can't leave my friend here. I can't leave her alone to rot in that awful dungeon, waiting for something as horrible as cleaning the waste buckets just to chip away at her sentence one day at a time.

I can't leave her to live like that for six whole years.

His gaze dips to my split lip for just a moment before lifting to my eyes once more, mouth twisting into an ugly sneer. It happens so quick, I would have thought I'd imagined it, if it weren't for the slight flare of his nostrils.

"I said no." The Justice stalks toward me with long strides. I will my shoulders to keep from curling inward as he stops three paces from me.

Three paces too close.

“She knows,” I say, taking a gamble. From their collective, horrified reactions followed by the light of curiosity brightening Greyson’s eyes, I have a feeling they don’t want anyone else knowing about me. I don’t understand why, but right now, I don’t have it in me to care about anything other than getting me and Mariette out of here. “She knows about me.”

Maverik rolls his head back and stares at the ceiling with a long sigh. Greyson runs a hand through his silver-white hair.

“No,” the Justice growls again. Even with the distance between us, I swear I can feel the heat rolling off his chest.

“We have to, Kane.” Greyson pulls at the front pieces of his hair. “We can’t—shouldn’t—let her stay here.”

“Who says she needs to stay here?” The Justice’s voice rumbles, and he doesn’t take his eyes off me when he answers his cousin. “We can just kill her.”

My pulse jumps. Maverik replies before I can protest.

“Sure,” he drawls, shrugging. “But you do it. I just cleaned my hands.”

“Don’t look at me,” Greyson says. “I did it last time.”

Horror creeps through my gut like a living vine, tying knots and twisting my insides at the thought I might have condemned Mariette to a premature death instead of helping my friend with her freedom.

The Justice glares at me for another heartbeat too long, jaw clenching and unclenching, before turning and shouldering past both his cousins. “We go get her. Then we leave.”

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CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

The door to the dungeon slams hard against the wall. I flinch at the noise but keep my head held high as I walk down the stairs for what I hope to be the last time.

When I reach the final step and Mariette springs up from her bed with blatant relief, I know I've made the right decision. I know she doesn't want extra attention; I know she doesn't want assignments with the Dracori. But this opportunity is different. This isn't for one or two measly days off her sentence—it's for all the days. It's worth the risk.

And I can't stand the thought of my only friend in here for the next six years. By herself.

Alone.

The sharp panther keeps her green eyes trained on me as I approach the bars. She glances briefly down at my unbound wrists before pursing her lips and stepping back to give the Justice and his cousins space.

The Justice glowers at me while Greyson stops in front of the bars to speak.

"You're coming with us." He reaches for a pair of cuffs and drops to a crouch. His tone is rougher than earlier, and when I see Mariette's eyes widen, doubt comes slithering back.

She studies the Three, casting nervous but shrewd glances at me while shuffling deeper into the cell, head shaking slowly.

"No," she breathes. "I'm…I didn't agree to take an opportunity, much less one with you."

Maverik tuts. "Sorry, darling. You're coming with us."

My friend's face crumples, but this is the right choice. I know it is. The only thing worse than being trapped is being caged and *alone*.

"But why?" Her voice breaks. My heart aches. She'll understand. She has to.

The Justice stiffens, still far too close to me. "Because you know."

"Know what?" Mariette asks, growing paler by the second. Greyson rises with a sigh.

He jerks his head in my direction; I shift my weight to add some distance between us. It does nothing to soften the edges of my awareness. My awareness of him, of his heat, of his proximity.

My friend looks at me with confusion in her eyes and questions in her frown. "What about her?"

The Justice shakes his head, and when his angry, molten gaze lands on me, I realize I can't do anything to protect Mariette. I can't even protect myself. It's all I can do to avoid shrinking from his rage. I square my shoulders anyway. This is our best chance.

"Tell anyone, and I will not hesitate to kill you both," he snarls. Then, he jerks his head at his cousins. "Grey, inform the Dracori Captain of our departure. Mav and I will get the provisions." He turns to me, ushering me into the cell as they nod and leave. With a cruel slant of his lips, he closes the bars. "I will be back for you later."

When the dungeon door slams shut, Mariette whirls on me, green eyes bright with fury.

"What did you do?" she hisses.

"I couldn't leave you here," I answer, hands raised in placation. "You would have been here for six years!"

"I know that," she snaps. "Don't you think I know that? I knew that when I accepted the sentence and I knew that when I turned the Dracori away."

"But why?" I ask. "With this one opportunity, we can walk away with a clean slate. The risk is high, but it's better than being stuck here."

"No it's not!" She snarls and pulls at the ends of her short, brown hair, deflating as she paces the short length of our prison. "It's not the same for me out there as it is for you. It's dangerous for me out there. It's safer for me…in here."

My heart squeezes at how small she looks, because Mariette is anything but small. She's taller than me, stronger than me, and I'll bet she's faster

than me, too. She's certainly more confident in every way I've seen so far.

I rub my sore arm with one hand and lean against the bars, letting their cold chill sooth my back where it seeps through my thin shirt. "Whatever is looking for you out there—whoever is after you—you'll be safer with those three than anywhere else. Even here. I'm sorry I didn't ask you first. I didn't know, and I should have asked. It's just…" I wring my hands and look at the pathetic straw piles on the worn stone ground. "I couldn't leave you here."

I gather the courage to look at her, my voice quiet but strengthening with the knowledge I did what I felt was right. "I couldn't leave you here all by yourself. Six years is a long time on your own."

When Mariette finally lifts her eyes to mine, they're devoid of anger. There isn't gratitude in her gaze, but there is a hint of understanding. And that's enough for me.

I inhale the crisp, late-summer night air and look up at the half moon hanging high in the dark sky. It's been a while since I was outside past the evening hours. We're always brought back to our cells before the sun fully sets, so the chill rippling over my skin is one of pleasure.

The Justice exits the armoury building carrying two black vests. He tosses one to Maverik, who catches it with one hand. Keeping the other, he takes two long strides toward me.

Greyson stirs from where he prepares his horse. "Kane. You sure—"

The Justice grunts and lifts the vest up to my body. Maverik does the same to Mariette, who stays motionless during the assessment. Though I don't quite dare to breathe under the scrutiny of the Justice's gaze, I settle on being grateful for added protection. I just wish he weren't standing close to me, and I wish dearly it were someone else—anyone else—helping me with the armour. His stony gaze scrapes over my body; I can't decide if I prefer the heat of his anger over this new, cold distance.

He gestures for me to lift my arms as Mariette lifts hers for the wolf shifter, her silencing cuffs now separated and without the chain, though still firmly locked on her wrists. The Justice steps closer. I catch a whiff of his scent, and I can't describe it but somehow, I know it as *him*. It sends a

shiver down my spine, warming my core. I press my legs together to keep from trembling. This reaction is from fear and fear alone.

This reaction is from fear *and fear alone*.

I recite the mantra in my head as he freezes. Before I can mention it, his nose flares slightly, and his eyes dip to the movement of my legs. When he lifts his gaze back to mine, I force myself to stop breathing just to keep his scent from affecting me further. His eyes, which should have been lightened by the moon, darkens as he slips the stiff vest over my arms and settles it over my chest. With our height difference, he has to bend to make sure it's snug, and suddenly, his face is so close to mine.

It's right there.

He's right there.

Long lashes blink slowly over darkened irises that aren't devoid of emotion anymore—and now I know for certain the predatory hunger there is the worst gaze of all. Roaring fear mixes with the *nothing* heating me from within. Confusion and repulsion whirl, a maelstrom in my head; am I so love-starved, I'd forget how much he hates me? How much I disgust him?

Skies, I will forgo all armour for the rest of my existence if it means I never have to be this close to him again.

I continue holding my breath as he drags his eyes down to where his long fingers tug the bottom of the vest. His fingers play with the frayed edges of my shirt sticking out past the armour, and my heart hammers so loudly, I worry he'll hear. If he mentions it—if he says anything about my heart or even my rags—it might be worth forfeiting my life just to avoid the shame.

"Breathe," he mumbles.

I blink. Did I hear him wrong? Did he just say—

"Breathe, Red." He meets my eyes once more; the gold is as bright as they were moments ago. His voice rumbles, and though I know it's impossible, when he speaks so low and so close, it feels like his words are whispered over my skin, a soft caress I'd never expect from the ruthless man before me.

My mouth parts involuntarily. I exhale.

Something flashes in his eyes, but he looks down at the straps and clasps at the bottom of the vest before I can figure out what it is. His deft fingers make quick work of them before moving to the ones on my side.

I swallow and try to remember the importance of air.

The Justice grabs the vest in one hand and lifts the other, slipping a finger between the armour and my shirt to gauge the remaining space. The effect is nauseating. I think I might vomit; my head spins from the mere proximity of his hand to my bare skin—just one thin piece of cloth separating us from direct contact.

I hate myself almost as much as he hates me.

If he's going to be doing this again, I will have to ask for thicker clothes.

The Justice makes a dissatisfied sound, pulling his hand away and yanking the side straps some more. I ignore the immediate loss of heat and take deep breaths of air, hoping to clear my mind of its sudden insanity.

"Oof," I exhale with the force of his pull, grateful it also wrenches me from my inappropriate mental spiral.

He releases me from his clutches entirely and sighs as he steps back, dragging a hand through his hair. I pick at the long straps and pull the vest to one side, studying the gap created by the extra material. It's barely visible. I wouldn't have noticed at all, had his frown not given away his displeasure.

"That'll do." Maverik gives Mariette's shoulders a firm pat and a bright smile. Though her expression is stone-cold, irritation is evident in her eyes. The wolf shifter's smirk fades when he looks at me. "That doesn't fit."

"You think?" the Justice snaps.

The other man doesn't even blink. He, Greyson, and even Mariette join the Justice in studying me. The vest seems fine, but under everyone's skeptical gaze, my fingers itch to play with a loose strand of thread and my feet suddenly seem incapable of staying still.

"I think it fits." I pull at the vest, the material barely bunching in my hand. "Decently, at least."

"And that's the smallest size?" Greyson ignores me, eyeing the black armour wearily as he looks from mine to Mariette's. "She didn't seem that much smaller."

"Of course it is." The Justice's tone is sharp, but there's no bite to the reply. "And she is. I was hoping the straps would make a difference."

"I think it's fine," I repeat, releasing the armour so it rests against my body.

The Justice gives me a withering look. I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

Maverik shakes his head. “If that’s the best we’ve got, that’s the best we’ve got.”

The Justice mutters something about sizes before turning to his horse. Mariette looks at my vest and clicks her tongue with disapproval.

“You too?” I play with the straps despite knowing they won’t tighten further.

The panther shifter purses her lips.

“Well…it’s better than nothing, right?” I give a shaky laugh, but my eyes slide over to the three men readying the three horses.

Mariette stiffens. She notices it, too.

Surely, they wouldn’t give her armour just to abandon her to fend for herself? Especially while silenced.

I look down at my own bruised but unshackled wrists.

“You’re not a shifter, but you’re not shiftless, either.”

Greyson’s words roll in my head until the man himself turns and cocks his head at me and my friend.

“Why are there only three horses?” I blurt before I lose the nerve to ask.

The silver-haired wolf rubs the back of his neck.

Maverik smirks and shrugs. “Opportunities with us grant high rewards for a reason. We ride fast and we strike hard. There’s no room for carriages and the like to slow us down.”

Mariette turns slowly to me, and I don’t have to see her to feel the irritation once more present in her eyes.

Before they’d fetched us from the dungeon, I’d briefed her on everything that transpired while I was away—including the confusing cat transformation, which she didn’t understand, either—and to my dismay, she wasn’t able to provide more information on the specifics of what the Three actually do for the king. Aside from the vague, terrifying whispers about unleashing fury on behalf of the crown, we have no hints about the assignments they act on or what we’re expected to do.

I bite my lip to keep from smiling at the ridiculousness of the situation. Mariette catches it; with a sigh, she allows her lips to pull up ever so slightly. At least we have similar humour.

We’re in this now.

“What’s the assignment?” I ask, eyeing the horses and shuffling away from the Justice in what I hope is a subtle manner.

Maverik opens his mouth, but the dragon shifter answers first.

“You don’t need to know,” grunts the Justice.

He doesn’t turn to look at us, so I glare at his messy hair. The sheaths of the two short swords crossed over his back nearly blend in with the all-black of his shadowy armour, but the threads of silver on the dark pommels glow in the moonlight. “How long will we be away for?”

Still working on his horse and equally dismissive, he answers, “Not for you to know.”

I temper the rising bristle while catching Mariette’s reproachful look. She’s right. Don’t give the deadly dragon shifter more reasons to hate me.

Maverik chuckles, leaning against his horse and crossing his arms. “You’re with me, Scarlet.”

I sigh with a mixture of surprise and relief; I’m glad I won’t have to ride with the Justice, but I’m not eager to ride with anyone at all.

Greyson offers to help Mariette onto his horse, and something about being out of the dungeon and in the open night air must have her feeling bold as well, because the look she gives the silver-haired wolf shifter could have melted ice. To my surprise, he steps back and allows my friend to mount the horse as he adjusts the large case worn at his back, shifting it to his chest before moving the quiver of arrows down to join several others already at his hip.

I’m not above accepting assistance, especially when I’ve rarely had the privilege of riding; most things I’d needed were within reasonable walking distance, and when I needed to transport something heavy, I rented a donkey and a cart from Grengrove’s carriage rentals—it was less expensive than caring for an animal of my own when I could barely care for myself.

Maverik’s hand is large over mine as he helps me up and onto his horse. I keep my eyes firmly trained on the saddle and animal beneath me as I move into a comfortable—if that’s even possible—position, determined not to look into the pair of amber eyes I feel watching my every move.

Instead, I focus on the ease with which the wolf shifter throws himself onto the horse. As he settles in, sitting directly in front of me and far too close for comfort, I suddenly forget what I’m to do with my limbs. Am I straddling the horse correctly? Will the horse be uncomfortable if my feet bounce against his side?

Maverik chuckles, and I feel its rumble as I wrap my arms tentatively around his waist. He and Greyson wear the same—or very similar—dark-coloured, lightweight armour as their cousin, though neither have his twin

blades at their backs. Instead, hanging from Maverik's waist is a massive sword, bigger than any I've ever seen. It engulfs the smaller one attached to his horse, but both are larger than the shorter ones worn by the Justice and the blades at Greyson's hip.

Though the vests they gave me and Mariette look similar to their lightweight protection, ours are obviously made of lesser material. I feel the way Maverik's armour molds to his middle, flexing with him like a second skin, whereas mine digs into my sides despite everyone's insistence that it's too big.

I still think the vest is fine, because the three men are armed to the teeth and Mariette can defend herself as soon as the cuffs come off, while I…I'm me.

Resting my forehead against the rugged bits of armour at Maverik's back, I consider my options. I can avoid the brunt of magical shifter attacks, but the thumb I rub against the bruise on my arm is a stark reminder I can't escape all injury.

Not to mention the bizarre ability to change into a cat. That's another headache I can't even force myself to face right now.

Without a word exchanged, the King's Three gallop into the night.

"Hey." A masculine voice pierces through the fog of my dreams. "Hey."

I jerk awake. My feet catch on nothing, and I flail my arms about, trying to catch my balance.

Except instead of steadying myself, I become even more unstable. I feel the terror of slipping from my seat—where even am I?—as the unsettling sensation of falling overwhelms my mind.

A strangled cry leaves my mouth before a strong hand clamps down on both my arms. My vision straightens and I grab onto the body in front of me out of pure instinct, clinging with every fibre of my being as the night's memories crash into me.

It's still dark, though the blue hue of the sky indicates it won't be long before the sun comes up. I press my face against Maverik's back, letting the

harder pieces of his armour dig into my cheek as I pant for air, waiting for the panic to subside.

“Rude awakening?” he asks. His chuckle vibrates through my arms as I tighten my grip.

“Something like that,” I mutter, shutting my eyes and taking another gulp of air. I turn to press my other cheek against his back.

“Sorry,” he says, not sounding very sorry at all. “You were falling asleep, and you started letting go. Can’t have you falling off.”

I narrow my eyes at his jovial tone. If I could see his face, I’m sure he’d have winked.

“Thanks,” I say. Taking another deep breath, I look past his large body at the nature flying past us. As an afterthought, I add, “I guess.”

He doesn’t even try to hide his laugh.

The Justice rides in front, with Maverik and Greyson flanking his sides, so I have a clear view of his back straightening as his shoulders tighten.

I squeeze Maverik’s abdomen and mutter, “Quit laughing. He might think I’m having a good time.”

“And?” The wolf shifter shakes his head, making no effort to silence his mirth.

“I don’t think prisoners are supposed to enjoy themselves.” I bite my lip.

He chuckles again. I squeeze him again.

He laughs again.

“I’m serious,” I hiss.

Maverik shakes his head, jostling my entire body with his joy. “That’s not why the cat’s got his trousers.”

“Then what?” My eyebrows rise even though he obviously can’t see.

The wolf shifter only shakes his head once more. “Don’t worry about it. Just hang on tight, okay?”

It’s my turn to stiffen, because I finally notice the change in the air. Afraid of the answer, I ask, “You mean for my general safety, or is something about to happen?”

Maverik doesn’t tense, but his voice is measured when he speaks. “We’re about to enter something. So just…hang on.”

I glance at Mariette, who looks as if she’s been staring wide-eyed at me for some time now.

“What is happening?” I mouth.

She shakes her head, mouthing back, “I don’t know.”

I rest my cheek against Maverik’s back, fingers brushing mindlessly over the rough ridges of his armour as my heart rate picks up.

It appears the danger no longer exists only in my dreams.

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CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

"Ready?" Maverik asks.

That one word spikes my adrenaline, raising my heartbeat until it's far faster than the rhythmic gallop of the horses. I want to squeeze my eyes closed—to shut out everything happening and wait until it's over—but this is what I had wanted. This is how I will earn my freedom.

Again.

"What—what do you need me to do?" I peel my face from his armour and peer around his wide shoulders at the trees we're racing toward.

"Nothing!" he shouts back. "Just stay put!"

I tighten my grip around his middle. "But does this count as surviving the assignment?"

His answering laughter does not ease my concerns in the slightest.

I hold my breath without meaning to as we hurtle into the trees. The wolf shifter doesn't seem bothered by the branches at all, and I'm grateful for his massive body breaking and blocking everything before they reach me.

Just as I start wondering why we're rushing through the woods, I realize Maverik and I have broken away from his cousins, and the only sounds I hear are the thunderous hooves of our horse. He slows slightly, and I look around, trying to understand what's happening. Nothing seems out of the ordinary until—

I gasp.

"M-Maverik," I stutter, gripping him tighter. "Maverik, there's someone up in the trees. There's—there are *three* someones!"

“Thank the skies,” he mutters. “I was getting bored.”

“Bored?” I hiss.

The shifter slows our horse into a trot, keeping his eyes trained ahead and *not* where two figures follow us from the treetops on our left. Or in the direction where the third sprints on the ground, between the trees to our right.

Maverik doesn’t even laugh in response. My stomach coils with nervousness.

The horse slows further.

The figure on our right bursts from the foliage, sword high in the air between both hands, wearing an expression of pure rage. As he lunges for us, I can’t help but flinch. It takes everything I have just to cling to Maverik instead of releasing him and jumping off the horse and out of the way.

Maverik twists beneath my arms.

He unsheathes the giant sword at his side.

He swings it overhead.

It knocks the other man’s weapon right out of his hands, taking his wrist with it.

I gasp.

Our horse doesn’t even break stride.

Despite nearly equalling my height in length, Maverik maneuvers the blood-stained blade like it weighs nothing, pointing it at the treetops as the horse slows, taking us back to where the stranger groans in pain.

“Come out and play, Rebels.”

My skin prickles as I clench my teeth. But it’s not the fear of coming face to face with a Rebel that makes the little hairs on the back of my neck stand. It’s his voice.

“Don’t you want to avenge your fallen?” he asks with a laugh as we circle the Rebel.

Maverik’s voice is as hard as the steel of his sword, and it sends shivers down my spine even as I clutch him tighter if only to keep from shaking myself off his steed. This is the voice of one third of the King’s Three.

He is one of them.

Despite his joviality and jokes and light laughter, I should never forget it.

Behind us, the felled man grunts through the agony and pushes himself back to standing, reaching for his sword. Maverik had broken it in half, but

it can still be a substantial weapon when wielded properly.

It won't mean much against the wolf shifter, though.

I point at the one-handed Rebel racing for us. "M-Maverik—"

"Don't let go!" he snaps over his shoulder.

I flinch and grab him with both hands. "The man—he got up."

"I know," Maverik responds calmly. "They'll get him."

They?

My fingers tighten around my arms, nails digging into my skin as I hang on, every muscle in my body taut with fear. I don't see the Justice or Greyson anywhere.

What I do see is another figure—a fourth—bursting from the trees directly in front of us.

Maverik curses and turns our horse, deflecting the incoming blade with his own. "Duck!"

Something glints in my periphery. I whip my head to look.

It's too late.

Hot pain explodes in my shoulder. My vision turns red.

The force wrenches me backward, loosening my hands from Maverik's middle.

I watch through tear-blurred eyes as my fingers scramble to catch his armour.

As he turns in his seat, one arm swinging his massive sword at the enemy, the other reaching out for me.

My hand is just out of reach.

I crash into the ground. White stars burst in my eyes, and I curl into myself, unable to breathe as I blink through the pain. Panic threatens the edges of my mind, but I've been here before—not *here* exactly, but I've been thrown harder. Forcing myself to take deep, long breaths to speed up the recovery from being winded, I groan as I glance at my side.

An arrow is buried in my shoulder.

What good is a vest if it doesn't even cover the parts I need protected?

A shadowed figure sprints past the bushes. Unnaturally long arms dart out at the sides. When two silver swords glint in the moonlight, steel claws of panic grip my heart. My heels kick the dirt as I scramble backward, but I don't even move a foot when another wave of pain rips through me.

Cursing, I realize I'm anchored to the ground by the stupid arrow. The man stalks closer. My beating heart grows more frantic.

I kick the ground again, but the pain tears a groan from my lips. The man gets even closer—close enough to see the white of his teeth as he watches me pivot on the arrow.

His pale, gaunt face pulls into a grin; fear takes over my every instinct. He slows his steps and rolls his shoulders, as if enjoying my antics. I reach over to the piece of wood tethering me to the ground and take a deep breath. My fingers wrap around it and I clench my jaw, preparing for what I have to do.

Pain blinds me as the arrow digs into my flesh.

But the man is getting closer. I have to do this.

I have to free myself.

I take another breath, filling my lungs with courage.

Then red explodes.

But it's not my pain, and it's not my blood.

It's from the man who's no longer walking toward me.

The man who's no longer…standing.

The blades in his hands are staked into the ground, and he's dropped to his knees. His jaw slackens. His eyes glaze over. He falls onto his face.

And behind, another figure rises from the shadows.

One more terrifying than the first.

The King's Justice.

I inhale, but there's no bravery left in the air. Because he crouches, grabs the fallen Rebel, and lifts him by the hair with one hand.

As he stands, the Justice tilts the man's head; it lolls lifelessly to the side, exposing the pale skin. When he opens his mouth, horror sinks deep in my gut, numbing even the pain in my shoulder. His eyes darken. His fangs elongate.

Then he sinks his teeth into the Rebel's neck.

I can't move.

This isn't real.

This is a nightmare—it has to be.

I saw it once before, but it did nothing to prepare me for the sight of the King's Justice drinking greedily from a dead Rebel. Drinking like his life depends on it—like he's no longer in control.

As if his dragon has taken over.

A whimper escapes my lips.

His shoulders stiffen. His knuckles turn white as he tightens his grip on the Rebel. Seconds turn into hours while he lifts his head slowly, his dark hair keeping his expression from me. His back rises as he takes a long breath; when he finally looks up with shadowy amber eyes, my breath hitches.

Am I next?

Blood drips from his chin as the Justice strides forward, dropping the Rebel as if he were nothing before kicking the body aside. As insignificant as a mere branch in his path.

Pain and fear war within me, neither gaining the upper hand until his eyes glow with an anger along with that dangerous hunger. Alarm bells ring across every part of my body.

Terror wins.

I turn, clenching my teeth through the blinding pain as I reach for the arrow once more.

But again, I'm too late.

He's here.

He's going to kill me.

The Justice is going to drink my blood. Devour me. Empty me.

Death is here, and his name is Kane.

He stops paces from me, towering over my shrinking body. Moonlight breaks through the clouds, casting him in shadows I know are darker than the blood on his face but nowhere near as black as his heart.

When he crouches, I flinch.

I don't think I can watch my death happen, but nothing comes out of my mouth even when I try to beg.

So it might make me a coward, but I squeeze my eyes closed and hope the skies will have mercy and make my death a quick one.

Another rush of blinding pain tears my body apart, and I know the skies aren't listening.

I scream. Waves of pain crash through me one after another, radiating from so many places, there's no point of origin. It's everywhere all at once as his large hand wraps around the arrow, twisting it in his grasp.

Nausea rises, but I can't look away. In one motion, he yanks it from my shoulder and flicks it to the side as he stands.

Wet gasps don't draw enough air to my lungs. Even wincing sends fresh, dizzying pain surging through my body. I can't move my arm, but

he’s *right here*. I can’t let him draw out my death—I can’t let myself be amusement for yet another shifter even as I skitter along the edge of death. I kick with my heels and push the ground with my one good arm, ignoring the rocks and wood stabbing my palm. They’re nothing compared to the Justice.

But I can’t get away fast enough.

He lowers himself over me, dropping to his knees so one is on each of my sides. His form is so large, so formidable, he blocks the moon from my view entirely, leaving him as a silhouette—the harbinger of my doom.

The Justice bends at the waist, dropping closer until I see only the gold of his eyes as his large and heavy hand clamps my mouth shut, muffling my cries of fear. Of agony.

He presses down hard, smashing my lips into my front teeth.

Silencing me.

The thought of dying like this, held down and crushed, thrown away and forgotten about like the man he drank from—it ignites a spark of defiance deep in my chest. The same one that kept me alive when I was on my own. When I had nothing and no one.

His fingers tighten over my face until my teeth cuts the insides of my cheeks.

The spark in my chest grows into something bigger, the flames fanned by the rising anger of being discarded like I’m nothing. Abandoned by everyone who knew and loved me. Left to die as if I don’t matter.

I wrap my hands around the one holding me down, prying at his fingers. My nails dig into his skin as well as mine, scratching and gouging my own face.

But I don’t care.

The pain means I’m alive. The bleeding means my heart still beats.

I want to live—or at the very least, I don’t want to die like this.

I’m not going to die like I don’t matter. I’m not going to die because some dragon shifter decides it’s my time. I’m not going to die at the hands of a man named *Kane*.

The darkness of his form engulfs my vision. I kick everywhere. Anywhere.

I flail until my foot makes contact with something solid, and a deep grunt fills my ears.

Then I kick harder.

“Cut it out,” he growls, increasing the pressure on my face.

The taste of metal—of my own blood—floods my tongue.

It only makes me angrier.

He leans over me, pressing my body down with his heavier one and restricting my movement. His face drops right next to my ear, and I hear a sharp inhale before he speaks.

“Stop.” The hot breath of the angry, guttural word brushes against my skin, making me shiver in the worst of ways even in the face of death.

Clouds move to reveal the moon, letting her light shine on us just enough to reflect against his glowing, golden eyes as he lifts his head until I see his face.

Do his eyes change with his mood, or is it related to his bloodthirst?

It doesn’t matter; if possible, he looks even angrier.

“Why”—I force my fingers into the tiny gap between his fingers and my face—“are you…doing this?”

“Because…” He sits on my abdomen and wrenches my hands from the one holding my face.

“You’re…” His knees move to pin my arms to my sides.

“Bleeding.” He removes his hand from my mouth.

Before I can scream, a sickeningly metallic yet sweet liquid drips into my mouth. It’s hot and disgusting and my body rejects it, my throat gagging to vomit.

Kane won’t let me.

My muffled screams don’t make it past his massive body as he holds me down and forces me to drink…

…from his wrist?

Am I drinking his blood?

Is he forcing me to drink his blood?

I physically and mentally recoil with revulsion, but I can’t push him away. He’s too strong.

When he finally releases me, I cough and splutter as bile rises in my throat.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” His voice is still rough, but the command is clear. Enough that I pause and glance at him.

“Why?” I ask, the disgust still strong on my tongue as I mirror his stance and sit back on my heels. I gag once more when I wipe my mouth and my skin comes away crimson.

“You were bleeding.” Kane drags the back of his own hand over his mouth and locks eyes with me. Turning his arm, he licks the blood from his wrist.

Where my mouth was.

I shiver—from loathing and nothing else. Because otherwise, I’d have to wonder what’s wrong with me, and there just isn’t enough time to consider that right now.

“I can see that,” I snap. Rising and flexing my aching hands, I add, “I can certainly feel it.”

I also don’t have time to consider where this gumption comes from, because a dark eyebrow rises as he stands, and my temper flares once more.

“You don’t think I can feel it?” I cross my arms.

The other eyebrow joins the first. A slow smirk spreads as he wipes more blood from the corner of his lips, looking altogether like nothing happened—especially because the blood doesn’t seem to show on his black clothes in the darkness of the night.

“Can you?” he asks, almost purring with satisfaction.

It makes me sick to my stomach. I spit. It doesn’t help the remaining metallic taste in my mouth.

He looks pointedly at my shoulder. To my horror, there’s no pain.

In fact, there’s no pain anywhere on my body.

The only thing bothering me now is the disgusting taste of his blood still in my mouth, amplified by that blatant bemusement on his face.

I uncross my arms, my own expression crumpling against my will as confusion takes over. “What…?”

Words don’t come to me—because what could possibly explain what’s happened?

“I didn’t dream that arrow.” I shake my head, rolling my shoulder and feeling the intact bone and muscle. “I know it happened. It took me right off the horse.”

Kane scowls. “Maverik was careless. That shouldn’t have happened.”

My eyes widen, my senses finally returning as I refocus on our surroundings. He doesn’t take his eyes off me, but I risk pivoting, looking for his cousin and the other Rebels; the woods are silent.

“Is he okay?” My hand goes to my throat.

The Justice grunts and crosses his arms. “He won’t be once I’m done with him.”

I glance back at the dragon shifter and dare to narrow my eyes once more before stepping in the direction from which I'd been separated from Maverik.

"Don't."

I pause mid-step and look over my shoulder at him.

"It's a bit of a…bloodbath." He drags a hand through his hair. The swords strapped to his back move with the action. "Out there."

My brows furrow as I look from him to the body of the man he'd discarded. Grimacing, I can't help but ask, "You?"

He shrugs. "And Maverik. And Greyson."

He seems to have calmed enough that I want to try my luck with asking what exactly happened. He certainly doesn't seem intent on killing me.

Yet.

"Why did you…" I shift my weight from one foot to the other, wiggling my fingers at my side as I wait for the pain to hit me again.

It doesn't.

He crosses his arms.

"Did you do this?" Lifting my hand, I move my arm painlessly in front of me. "Is that why you forced me to…" I swallow, trying to ease the words from my mouth. "Is that why you forced me to drink your blood?"

Kane tilts his head and purses his lips.

"Why did—" I'm interrupted by a fair-haired rider bursting through the trees on one side, the other doing the same from elsewhere, Kane's horse in tow. Mariette's face pops out from behind Greyson, and though she's entirely ashen and visibly shaken, she doesn't appear injured.

While Greyson doesn't smile as blatantly as Maverik's wide grin, their shared silver-grey eyes both shine bright with mirth.

"That went about as disastrously as it could have." Greyson sighs, dropping the reins of Kane's horse. Mariette's complexion still matches the wolf shifter's hair, but she unwraps her arms from Greyson's waist and adjusts in her seat. I wince as the moon's glow highlights the silencing cuffs still firmly locked around her wrists. This was a terrifying situation for me, but I hadn't even considered how it must have affected her. For someone who grew up with and lived most of her life with shifter powers, having to deal with an attack without her panther must have been horrible on an entirely different level.

“I don’t know about that. Excitement is good every once in a while.” Maverik winks at me. “Keeps you on your toes.”

Kane whirls on Maverik, shoulders stiff with anger. “You’re not allowed to talk.”

I blink at the ferocity of his tone and glance at the third cousin, who sits quietly on his horse, cleaning what looks to be a crossbow. When Greyson reaches behind him, Mariette shimmies in her seat and digs into one of the bags fastened to the side of their horse. Then she places into his waiting hand a case. He wipes the weapon before placing it into the case, snapping it closed while the others continue their vicious exchange.

“You.” Kane suddenly turns and stalks toward me.

“No,” I say automatically, backing away two steps for each one he takes.

He snarls. Maverik tosses his head back and laughs.

I retreat another step. The dragon shifter’s long legs catch up to me with ease.

Greyson only sighs as Mariette hands him an arrow, her eyes wide with concern while putting the case back into the bag.

“What do you—”

Greyson interrupts Mariette with a twist in his seat, clamping a hand over her mouth.

“You’re sitting with me.” Kane growls, grabbing my elbow and yanking me toward his horse, who gives him a side-eye as he tugs on her reins with his other hand.

“What—why? No!” I sputter, trying but failing to retrieve my flailing limb. Kane’s grip only tightens as he snaps at Greyson for smiling.

“Wasn’t even looking,” the wolf shifter replies. True to his word, he doesn’t even spare me a glance.

“You got yourself knocked off Maverik’s horse.” Kane points a finger at me. Then he jabs his finger behind him at the aforementioned cousin. “And he let it happen.”

“I did not!” Maverik protests at the same time I shout, “He did not!”

Kane only scowls harder. “You’ve lost your privileges to sit with anyone else. Now you have to sit with me.”

An unpleasant shiver races along my spine at the thought of sitting with him—of being so near him. I try a different angle. “What good is armour

anyway, if it doesn't even protect me? If I'd had something like what you three have, I would have been fine."

"She's fine." Kane jerks a thumb at Mariette.

"*She*—" Mariette starts.

I don't find out what she has to say, because Greyson slaps a hand over Mariette's mouth once more. But I see the fire in her eyes.

Is that anger for me? Is she upset on my behalf? Because I was injured?

"This is not a discussion." Kane doesn't wait for a response before putting his hands on my waist and lifting me onto his horse. My mind hums with anticipation. Then he mounts, and I'm staring at his back, the twin swords no longer strapped to him.

Instead, those same hands reach around and take mine, pulling me forward until my forehead collides with his armour.

"Hey!" I protest.

Kane's hand stays wrapped around both my wrists so I can't even push back to give myself more room.

"At least let me adjust," I grumble.

He doesn't respond; I don't have time to register what he's doing until it's done.

Until I can't separate my wrists.

Because he's tied me to him.

"What do you think you're doing?" I mutter against the hard ridges of his armour. If I shift my hands a certain way, I can at least give myself a little more breathing room.

"Now you won't fall," he says simply.

The King's Three start riding once again, and once again, no one tells me where we're headed.

"You mean I can't fall."

He makes a sound I take to mean agreement.

"I also can't let go."

"That's right."

"As if I were planning to let go and fall off the horse on my own?" I huff, tempted to smash my forehead against his back. Unfortunately, I suspect such an action would hurt me more than it would hurt him.

"You basically threw yourself off."

"An arrow pierced my shoulder and pinned me to the ground!" I glare at his back, hoping the skies might let me hurt him with just my eyes if only I

tried hard enough. My brow furrows as I fumble with the bindings, feeling their strange texture.

“You didn’t even try to hold on,” Kane scoffs.

“How would you know?” I snap. My anger once again rises, making me brazen beyond reason as I finally settle into the rhythmic gait of his horse. “You weren’t even there.”

He tenses under my arms.

My fingers stop working at the bindings around my wrists. I tilt my head and pause. Have I finally gone too far?

“I know,” he says quietly.

He doesn’t sound angry, so I don’t think I’ve crossed a line. But he doesn’t sound as I expect, either.

Of the King’s Three, Kane is known as the most ruthless, the most vicious, and the most cruel.

He’s the worst of them all. The worst of the worst.

He yanked the arrow out of my shoulder without warning. He held me down. He forced me to drink his blood.

Even though it did heal me, I can’t forgive him for it. For making that choice for me.

My lips curl involuntarily simply from the memory of the disgustingly sweet, metallic taste.

And yet…

His tone just now doesn’t match what I know to be true of the King’s Justice.

I don’t like it.

And I don’t like knowing he can crush me with a mere speck of his raw power—even without the aid of his dragon—and the way he looks at me with pure fury even though I’ve never done anything to slight him.

I especially don’t like the sturdiness of his hard body under my arms. Maverik is strong too, but with Kane, it’s different.

I don’t like any of it.

But as much as the fear keeps my body tense with dread, nothing keeps the fatigue from creeping over my weary bones. Nothing keeps the heaviness from my eyes, my breaths from lengthening, and my mind from slipping into unconsciousness.

I bite my lip and stop resisting, letting my forehead drop against Kane’s back.

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CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

I drift into an uncomfortable sleep where my dreams are plagued by white wolves and red waterfalls and golden flames and tightening binds between flashes of moonlight and the galloping of horses.

When I wake once more, my head buzzes with fatigue, and the night is at its darkest hour. Kane has stopped our group as he works on the rope tying my hands to his abdomen.

“Finally tired of my presence?” I mumble through a yawn, excited to rub the lines of his armour out of my cheeks.

His only response is to pull the rope tighter before loosening the final knot and dismounting. He doesn’t bother with helping me off his horse.

“Shouldn’t have made me sit with you if you didn’t want me so near.” I make a face and throw a rude gesture at his retreating back. Mariette catches it and smirks as she makes her way to me with a bundle in her arms.

“Getting cozy with the King’s Justice?” she whispers, dropping two bedrolls onto the ground and separating them.

“Absolutely not,” I hiss as I crouch to help spread the bedding, keeping an eye on the three men who get to work setting up camp. “Don’t even think such nonsense.”

She snorts; the gleam in her eye is bright even in the night.

A fire crackles, drawing our attention before she can tease me again. Greyson stokes the flames while Maverik and Kane unpack their provisions.

When she looks back to me, her expression turns sombre. “What do you think that was?”

I purse my lips; I can't even begin to guess. "I missed most of it. What did you see?"

The panther shifter's brown hair glows amber against the fire's light. "The Justice and Greyson separated not long after they broke away from you two. He didn't say much, but Greyson seemed to know exactly where to go and exactly when to shoot. He had these…" Mariette shudders and wraps her arms around herself, studying the wrinkled bedrolls. "He had these weapons I've never seen before. They attach to those gloves he wears, and he used them with such precision. His little knives took out at least two Rebels alone."

My eyes drift to the quietest of the King's Three. Though he's not as loud or as openly cruel as the other two, Greyson is a force to be reckoned with, and I'm starting to think what happened earlier had been planned for some time.

"Maverik must have drawn the Rebels out from their hiding places." I chew on my bottom lip as I recall the way he changed his horse's pace seemingly at random. Maybe I just didn't know how to see the patterns. "And once they revealed themselves, that's when the slaughter started."

Mariette nods.

"What do you think they wanted?" I glance at the King's Three, but she knows I'm not asking about them. "Do you think they had anything to do with…"

Her green eyes widen. She lifts a hand to her chin and stares at the ground, drawing circles in the dirt with her finger. After a moment, she nods slowly, brows furrowed. "I think those guys had red eyes. The ones who shifted, anyway."

I inhale sharply. "Like that night?"

Her gaze reflects the fear racketing in my chest.

"I also thought those twisted wolves that night *were* Rebels." My hand presses on my stomach as images of poor Shelley invade my mind. "Because they attack everyone related to the crown, right?"

Mariette looks out at the fire, dragging a hand through her short locks. "Maybe. I don't know."

I sigh too, following her line of sight—but mine continues past the flames until my eyes snag on Kane's dark form.

The King's Justice.

His silhouette is not the tallest nor the biggest of the Three, but Kane is undeniably the most intimidating. I've witnessed firsthand the truth behind the rumours. I watched his eyes blacken when his fangs elongated. Just like the dark eyes of Samyel. Just like the eyes of shifters who don't have control of their shifts. Rumours say he can't control his dragon, and I fear the day I have to witness his dragon taking over.

People whisper of the ferocity of dragon shifters—of Kane's dragon, specifically—saying only his cousins, the greatest wolf shifters to have ever lived—stronger even than King Waylon himself—are able to keep the murderous dragon in check. That the only reason neither Lord Greyson nor Lord Maverik have ascended the throne is for their loyalty to Lord Kane.

It takes both wolves to wrangle him, and neither are willing to let their cousin descend into madness.

Some say he's unbonded. But the King's Three are hundreds of years old—if Kane truly is unbonded, how has he survived so long?

It feels like I've barely been asleep for an hour when I'm forced to wake, though we must have slept through most of the night, because the sun is just rising when I push myself out from the warmth of my bedroll. Beside me, Mariette does the same. She and I slept near each other last night, but I'm not entirely sure any of the men slept at all; they were awake when I fell asleep, and they look to have been awake for a while as I get up. Everything has already been packed except for Mariette's and my bedding.

As I begrudgingly roll my sleeping bag and hand it to Mariette, a flash of white moves in the corner of my eye.

I freeze.

A massive, pure-white wolf creeps out from behind a boulder. Memories of that night flick through my mind as I glance toward the dying fire, looking for anything I might use as defense.

Another wolf, this one dustier grey in colour, joins the first.

Mariette inhales sharply.

Two pairs of silver-grey eyes swing to us. Between the wolves, a tall figure emerges from the trees.

When the light reveals that familiar angular, scarred face and mess of black hair, I sigh a breath of relief.

A smirk pulls at the corner of Kane's lips as his cousins begin their shift. "Were you expecting someone else?"

I shake my head. "More like hoping."

His eyes narrow, but his smile doesn't change. Silver magic wraps around Maverik and Greyson in strands, whirling faster and faster until their furred forms are hidden completely from view.

"Where did you guys go?" Mariette asks, drawing Kane's attention. Part of me is relieved, but the other part—a voice I squash and lock away into the deepest, darkest corners of my mind—immediately feels the lack of his gaze.

Maverik steps out fully dressed from the whirlwind of silver magic, rolling his shoulders as he gives her a lopsided grin. "That's for you to find out."

Greyson, doing the same, stretches as he sheds his animal form. "I think they should know—if just so they can prepare."

I swallow. I knew volunteering with the King's Three was a risk, just as I was aware my friend and I have been given no indication as to how far or how long we've travelled, or even in which direction. And despite the night's rest, worry gnaws at my gut. Still, I'm confident this is our best chance at securing our freedom.

"We're here now," I say, steeling my spine when four pairs of eyes turn to me. "I think it's only reasonable for you to tell us what the assignment is."

Greyson surprises me with a gentle smile while Maverik chuckles.

I calm my rising hackles. "Why? Why are you laughing?"

Kane sighs deeply, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "Unfortunately, this is not the assignment you two will assist with, so please"—he pins me with his golden gaze—"do try to stay alive."

"Telling us what to expect will help with that," I reply, crossing my own arms and internally wincing at my brazen attitude. Even with his reputation, even having watched as he brutalized people, I can't seem to shut my mouth around Kane; something about the dragon shifter irks me deep to my core.

Greyson doesn't wait for his cousin to respond. "We're closing in on a suspected Rebel group we've been tracking, so we're going in for an

ambush. There's…information we're looking to collect, so we will be taking prisoners."

Gold eyes never leave my face as Kane adds, "Which means they will be alive. Which means you will need to stay out of their way if you want to *stay* alive."

I bristle.

Greyson clears his throat. "Some details that might be pertinent to your…" he looks from me to his cousin. "…survival. We're raiding a location we're certain is one of their camps. We aren't expecting it to be big—maybe ten to fifteen people, likely shifters—so this should be fairly quick."

"We'll keep you two with the horses," Maverik says with a wide grin. "For your survival and such."

"What happens if they come for us?" Mariette lifts her arms, shaking her hands in the air to emphasize the cuffs still silencing her powers. "We can't defend ourselves."

Maverik's eyebrows rise. "Would you rather come with us?"

"That's not what she meant, and you know it," I say with a scowl.

"You've got the magic immunity thing, so use that." Kane waves a hand dismissively. It fans my irritation—how am I to use something I can't understand?—but I take a calming breath and think about Maverik's question. What is it I want?

I don't want to go with them into this raid.

I want to be done with this, go home, and start rebuilding my life.

Barking at the King's Justice won't help me reach my goal faster, so I simmer down and change tactics, because Mariette makes a good point. "That's not something I can control, and you know it doesn't protect me against all harm. Plus, she can't help us both when silenced."

I think I imagine things, because for a heartbeat, Kane glances at Greyson. With a subtle shake of the wolf shifter's head, Kane replies with a curt, "No."

If the King's Justice is so powerful, why does he need permission from his cousin?

I latch onto the opportunity and turn to Greyson. "Did you find out more about this cat thing?"

Silver-grey eyes study me for a beat. "Nothing to share yet."

I narrow my eyes and bite back a snarl. He's keeping something from me, and the other two know what it is. That has to be the reason Kane looked to the wolf.

"Are you afraid you can't keep us prisoner if you remove her shackles?" I taunt. Mariette swallows a noise from the back of her throat. "The King's Three can't handle a mere panther shifter?"

My brunette friend smiles in the corner of my eye, looking absolutely feline.

Maverik laughs, the sound a sharp bark echoing in the forest. "Good try, ladies."

"You'll only get in our way," Kane snaps. His arms, still crossed, flex with his irritation.

Greyson sighs. "What my curt cousin means is we will be less effective at our jobs if we're busy watching you. With you safe and sound, everything will be done before you know it."

"Don't worry," Maverik says, stretching his arms high above his head. Early morning sunlight warms the white of his hair, making it more blond than usual. "You'll be fine with the horses."

Greyson sighs again. "What *he* means is we do have plans for you—which I realize sounds ominous—but know they do depend on you two being alive. We do not intend for you to expire before then."

Maverik smiles brightly while his silver-eyed cousin simply looks weary. For two people who share such similar physical traits, they've never looked more different.

Mariette mirrors my scowl, but with the Three unwilling to change their minds, we're left with no choice but to stay behind.

We don't ride for long before dismounting and tying the horses. Knowing we slept so close to a Rebel camp makes my stomach swirl with nausea; we could have been attacked in the very way the King's Three now prepare to ambush them.

Though, as I eye the spring in their steps, I'm certain Rebels would not have succeeded.

"You know…I thought they were going to tie us to the horses." Mariette leans against a tree trunk, turning her hand in front of her as she studies the stone cuff. Her dark hair is back in its customary short tails on either side of her head, leaving the pieces at the back loose against the nape of her neck.

Greyson must have given her the ties. Or Maverik. I bite back a smile at the thought of Kane even thinking of such kindness.

His dragon would probably burn him to a crisp from the inside out.

Thick foliage provides ample shade against the mid-morning sun, so I walk toward one bright spot to feel the warmth on my face, dragging my fingers through my own tangled locks.

“I guess they’re just that confident they’ll be able to find us if we were to run,” I answer, closing my eyes and pushing aside thoughts of dark hair and a darker personality rimmed in gold.

“They certainly looked formidable…” Mariette mutters. “I wouldn’t put it past them to be able to scent us out.”

I nod. A shifter is granted enhanced abilities from their animal form, but being in their animal form does not entitle them the same abilities as their natural-born counterparts; just because a shifter has a heightened sense of smell does not mean she can successfully follow it and track someone.

Though almost all shifters can smell better when in their animal forms, accurate tracking by scent is one of the rarer abilities usually found only in powerful shifters—and of those, only the most skilled can track when in their human forms, as it requires precise use of magic.

I have no doubt the King’s Three would be able to catch our scent and follow our trail if we were to escape.

Though they left their bags with us, we don’t dare riffle through them except for the one pocket which Greyson said has food if we get hungry.

The horses graze on the grass while Mariette and I share a snack to pass the time and distract ourselves from rising anxiety.

“How did you get tangled up with Kieran and Wickham, anyway?” I ask, breaking pieces of cheese from the block and handing two to her.

“Bad luck, mostly.” She chuckles and takes them from me, popping one into her mouth. “We happened to be at the same market. Hartley’s shrill voice and Kieran’s loud mouth meant I heard every word even without trying to. They were talking about needing someone who could be a stealthy distraction, given Hartley, Tera, and—and Shelley—are all bird shifters, and Kieran’s bear strength was reserved for hauling the goods, and Wickham’s snake was needed for the locks.”

My mouth dries at the mention of Shelley’s name, but because Mariette doesn’t dwell on the twins, I don’t either. I force myself to swallow. “And

as a panther shifter, you were both quick enough and large enough to play the role of distraction?”

Mariette nods and sighs. “And I didn’t even get my promised marks.”

I crumble another piece of cheese from the block and take my time chewing. “Remember that amulet they were talking about?”

Green eyes slide over to me, brow raised.

“Remember how I said I didn’t know where it went?”

The other eyebrow joins the first.

I swallow.

Then I swallow again.

“I don’t actually know where it went…” I pinch my finger and thumb together in the air. “But I might have lied about not having seen it. Just a little.”

Mariette’s expression brightens before she tosses her head back, laughing so hard she presses a hand to her stomach.

“It wasn’t that bad,” I protest and throw some cheese at her. It bounces off her face, making her laugh harder.

I drink from my water skin and continue eating until she finally stops, wiping tears from her cheeks.

“Are you just about done?” I grumble.

She exhales hard and shakes her head. “I didn’t know you had it in you, kitty cat.”

I gasp at the insult. “You—you’re a cat, too!”

She laughs again before taking a deep drink from her water. “It’s not an insult, but I’m certainly no wild cat like you. You’re actually a cat.” She pauses, lifts a brow, and tilts her head as she adds, “Apparently.”

Mariette’s right. Big cats aren’t hated like wild cats.

I purse my lips. “It’s not like it’s something I can control.”

She shrugs. “We don’t choose our shifts.”

“Greyson said I’m not a shifter, though.” I look down at my hands as she takes the cheese from me, tearing a heel of bread to pair with it.

Mariette hums. “You may not be a shifter, but you’ve got something. And apparently, it’s important enough to keep us alive—at least for now.”

I turn, surprised at her words. “You think I’m the reason they’re going through the effort to keep us alive?”

“You should have seen the way Kane reacted when you were shot off Maverik’s horse.” She looks at me, her expression free of our earlier jokes.

“I’ve never seen him in action before, but that was…that was pure rage.”

My face scrunches with confusion. “Doesn’t necessarily mean he needs me alive.”

Mariette blinks slowly. “That was not normal anger, Scarlet. I thought…” She shudders and exhales. “I thought I was going to see the infamous dragon of the King’s Justice.”

I bite my lip, remembering the violence he’d enacted upon the man who’d attacked me.

But I also remember the weight of his body as he pinned me down, held my mouth, and force-fed me his blood.

I eat some cheese and wash it down with water.

“So yeah,” the panther shifter says. “I think he needs you alive for something. I don’t know what for, but I do believe he’ll keep you alive—at least until he gets what he wants.”

“Greyson knows something, but he won’t say what it is.” I play with the frayed edge of my shirt.

When Mariette stays silent, I turn to find her biting the thumb of one hand and fiddling with the ends of the hair at the back of her neck with the other—the pieces too short to be tied at the top of her head.

“What are you not telling me?” I narrow my eyes at her, pulse picking up.

“I mean, I think I understand his hesitance…”

I stare, willing her to speak faster.

She takes a deep breath and looks up at the bright sky. The wind rustles leaves on either side, and one horse lifts his head before returning to his grazing.

“I really don’t know if this is true. It was told to us as bedtime stories, you know? To scare children.” Mariette lifts a shoulder. “Do you know the story of how silence stones came to be?”

My brows knit together at the sudden change in topic. “…No? My adoptive parents weren’t big on bedtime stories. They were more the type to work you until you went to sleep without a complaint.”

She nods slowly. “Stories say silence stones were created a long, long time ago by a certain group of…people.”

“You mean shifters?” I tilt my head.

“No.” She pauses as if in search of the words. “As in…a different race.”

“Like natural-born dragons?”

“No,” she says, exasperated. “I mean the…the venihira.”

The last two words are whispered, but they mean nothing to me.

“The what?”

Mariette turns disbelieving green eyes to me. I shrug and blink, waiting for an explanation.

The trees explode.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

The cheese flies out of my hands. Mariette and I are flung from each other.

I crash into a tree trunk, and pain shoots through my back.

Stars burst in my vision as I drop onto all fours. My wrists ache from catching my fall, but I dig my fingers into the dirt and let adrenaline clear my mind as I look for the source of the explosion.

Not far from where we sat is a small crater. A dark-grey sphere no bigger than my fist sits at the centre, surrounded by wooden shards. I can't see anyone else, but someone had to have thrown it.

Mariette. Where is she?

I breathe through the pain shooting down my side, gasping in relief when I see her pushing herself up several trees away. She doesn't turn to me, but panic is evident in her posture, as I'm sure it is in mine, too.

My head throbs and my ears ring, but I rise and will my legs to stay steady. Someone had to have thrown that contraption, and they can't be far. We have to get out of here before they realize we survived.

Cursing the King's Three with every oath under the sky, I crouch and drag myself to Mariette, grinding my teeth at the dull ache throbbing through my side.

Each step is laborious. Each bit of ground crossed feels like an eternity has passed.

When I finally reach her, my friend exhales with relief. Pressing her back against a large tree, she waves me over.

I shake my head.

“Let’s go!” I say instead, hoping I’m not shouting too loudly. Between the persistent ringing and the thundering of my own blood in my ears, I can’t hear very well.

Mariette flinches and turns wide green eyes to me. Bits of hair stick up at various angles from one of the loosened ties at the top of her head.

She says something, but I can’t understand.

Her chest rises in quick successions as she shakes her hands in frustration. Between the shock of the explosion and being silenced from her magic, we have to out of here.

I grab her wrist, just above her shackles, and yank her with me through the forest.

I don’t know who threw that explosive.

I don’t know if they’re coming after us.

But I know we have to put as much distance between us and them as we can.

The Rebel camp is nearby; if someone else finds us before Kane, Maverik, and Greyson do, Mariette and I might not make it to see the afternoon sun.

I drag Mariette with me and hope we stumble into the King’s Three.

It takes a few steps, but once we get going, Mariette wakes from her stupor.

“What in the skies was that?” she shouts while dodging a low-hanging branch.

I pant for air and clutch at my side. Maybe they were right about a properly fitted vest. “I don’t know.”

She notices and turns to look. I gesture frantically for her to keep going.

“No time,” I gasp. “Just keep going.”

Mariette feels the terror of facing an enemy while silenced, but I’m not sure she truly understands the depth of what it means to face a shifter without magic of her own. The power imbalance—the inequality—is more than just bone deep. It is an understanding engraved upon my very soul. Not only do people view me as inferior, but the truth is, I am physically less than. Less strong. Less fast. Less capable.

In that unavoidable acknowledgement alone, I am already on uneven ground.

Mariette has only temporarily lost access to her powers; once she regains them, she'll be made whole.

I never will.

I'm used to it at this point—it's easy when almost everyone I meet is superior to me in some way—and I know the dangers of underestimating someone.

I was lucky to have survived that fight against Samyel. I'm not betting my life on luck again. Not if I can help it.

Every step sets a new, fiery pain ripping through my body. But we can't stop. We need more distance.

Another wave of pain makes blood roar in my ears.

I stumble, squeezing my eyes shut as I gasp through the impact of the fall shooting up my wrists.

The roaring continues.

Mariette and I look at each other.

The roaring isn't in my head.

In one heartbeat, she's lunging for me.

In a second, she wrenches me to my feet.

The trees explode, spraying bits of bark everywhere. I cover my face and turn as Mariette wraps her arms around me.

They've found us.

Whoever threw that first explosive contraption has found us.

And now we have to face them as a silenced shifter and an injured shiftless.

My ears ring. The dust settles. Mariette and I duck, staying low to the ground as we crawl farther from the source of the explosion. Broken branches stab my palms. Rocks dig into my knees. I breathe through my mouth, but a cough still threatens to rise.

My torso feels like it's on fire.

Mariette pulls me to one side, and I look up to see she's found a tree trunk—split from about the height of a fully grown man—large enough for us both to hide behind. I drag myself closer and settle against it, but she takes one look at me and tucks my knees up to my chest.

She flinches when I wince, but apart from a muttered apology, she continues adjusting my limbs until she's satisfied with how well I'm

hidden.

“What was that?” I ask through gritted teeth.

Her face is paler than usual as she looks out from her side of the trunk. “I don’t know.”

I press a hand to the wound under my ribs and bite my lip at the feel of slick blood on my palms. I shift on the ground so I can look as well, but Mariette’s hand clamps on my arm—and even that hurts. She fixes me with a hard look and shakes her head. I swallow and lean back.

“I don’t see anyone,” she whispers. “Maybe I should—”

A scream rips from my lips.

Mariette turns.

Her shriek joins mine.

A long, thick golden snake whips out across from us, ripping apart trees, bushes, and tossing boulders as if they were pebbles.

Mariette grabs my hand. I grip her fingers tight. For a moment, we’re both frozen as the rope-like creature disappears.

Then it comes back, swishing the other way.

She yanks me to her.

“It’s—”

“—monster—”

“—tail!”

Our words tumble over each other’s as we rise and duck, tripping over our own feet because it’s clear now what that was. It’s not a snake. It’s not a rope.

It’s the tail of a beast.

A monster.

A dragon.

Another roar echoes through the forest, its viciousness nearly bringing me to my knees.

My thoughts are no longer with the person who threw the explosive. Every fibre of my being now focuses entirely on getting away from the golden dragon crashing through the woods.

On never seeing the jaw that releases yet another roar, sending my heart skittering over my skin.

Never mind the Justice.

Never mind the King’s Three.

Never mind freedom or a pardon or a new life.

None of it matters if I don’t survive these next moments.

But the forest has been wrecked; the debris slows us down, and the throbbing at my side weakens my limbs. Adrenaline can only do so much, and I stumble every few steps. Each time, Mariette catches me and hauls me to my feet.

It’s not enough.

Someone shrieks in terror.

I whip my head to Mariette—but she’s already turned and looking at my side.

Neither of us screamed, so whose cry of pain did we hear?

Another wail rings. When it’s prematurely cut short, we both know what happened.

The cacophony of chaos grows until it surrounds us, leaving nothing and nowhere to escape. Every direction we turn reveals a new sound of torment or worse—death.

A man dressed in all black bursts through the wreckage, eyes wide and wild. Mariette and I freeze mid-step as he looks over.

But he acts as if he doesn’t see us at all. Clenching his fists, strands of silver magic loop over his legs. He glances over and opens his mouth, then seems to think better of it as he takes off.

I let out a breath.

Only to forget how to breathe when a massive snout smashes through the remaining stumps, sending splinters into the air as its huge, sharp teeth snap at everything in its way.

Following the open jaw is a long golden neck with a thick band of black at its base, wending his way through the destruction. My heart catches in my throat when his head turns in the direction the man had sprinted.

Thundering steps trample through the forest, thudding deep into my bones and taking over the pounding of my heart.

Four thick legs ending in terrifying, sharp claws emerge with the rest of the dragon’s body, followed finally by the same long, golden tail we saw earlier.

I don’t dare breathe.

His wings, huge and translucent, spread wide enough to cover the sun, casting a different golden glow over us.

With a growl, he tucks his wings close to his body, sniffing the air.

I blink. The monster smashes through the woods faster than I thought possible for a creature of his size, disappearing in a flurry of wreckage.

Mariette must also be rooted to the spot in fear, because neither she nor I move as our heads turn in the direction of his thunderous stomping.

A scream echoes through the woods.

It, too, is cut short.

I shudder at the reason.

Two white blurs streak past us without a backward glance.

I gulp.

"Was that…"

I nod. "I think that was."

Before I can even think of asking whether we should run toward or away from the King's Three, the wolves come barrelling back. I gasp and stumble, nearly tripping on a tree root. Mariette catches my elbow.

Following close behind is the dragon.

But no—the dragon isn't following the wolves. The wolves are trying to keep him back.

Maverik leaps into the air. He clamps his open jaw over the spiky tail nearly the length of his entire, white body as it swishes, flinging him until they're a golden-white blur that disappears into the trampled trees. Greyson chases the pair, disappearing with them.

I tug Mariette's hand. She turns, trembling and pale.

We take one step when the three beasts come crashing back.

The wolves are nearly half the dragon in size, but the dragon appears unbothered. In his jaws is the very man we'd watched run through the woods.

Or at least, what remains of the man.

Greyson drops low and growls, his pure-white hackles raised. Maverik, standing on the dragon's other side, snaps his jaws in warning.

The dragon doesn't even look at them. Instead, he lifts his head, jostling the black collar as it slides down to the base of his neck. He flings the man into the air and swallows him whole.

Then he turns his eyes to me, and the coldest shiver races down my spine.

Ink-black eyes.

In place of those golden eyes that have become so familiar to me are dark ones completely unlike what I've come to expect from Kane.

These are not his eyes. These are filled with his dragon's fury.

Even when Kane looked at me with absolute hatred and disgust, his glares did not contain the rage that looks upon me now.

Greyson jumps between me and the dragon. His pure-white body is so large, I'm certain he blocks us from the beast's view.

"Move," I mumble, pushing Mariette's elbow. "We should move."

The dragon snaps his golden jaws. Maverik snaps his in response.

While they're preoccupied, Mariette and I shuffle along the forest floor, trying to make as little sound as possible. Despite finding the King's Three, we also found the Justice's dragon, and Kane is not the one in control.

I never thought I'd wish to see those golden eyes.

Whatever Kane's uncle did to help him, it was not enough.

As we pass a boulder, I press a hand to my side and risk twisting to check on the beasts.

The wolves jump around their cousin, furry tails sweeping the ground as they dart to the side when the dragon head butts one of them. I slow without meaning to, utterly transfixed by the sight.

The back and forth, the way they maneuver around each other, none of it seems practiced or rehearsed, but it doesn't look aggressive, either. Even when the dragon snarls at the wolves, and even though his massive snout and teeth are far bigger than those of his cousins, their interactions lack the violence I would have expected from bringing together such vicious creatures. It looks almost…playful.

I shake my head. Whether they're just having fun does not make a difference to me, especially when it's clear Kane is not in control.

"Come on," Mariette hisses over her shoulders when she notices I'm not at her heels.

I nod and turn, but I twist too fast. The wound at my side sends electrifying pain lancing through my body and I cry out as I reach for my friend.

Her green eyes widen. She steps toward me, but when she grabs my arm, I feel as if she's tearing me in half.

I gasp in agony, pressing my other hand to the injury and groaning as hot blood gushes through my fingers.

Looking up at Mariette's horrified expression, I open my mouth to reassure her the wound isn't so bad. But she's not looking at me. She's looking behind me.

The thunderous roar in my head settles to a dull ache as I slowly turn, realizing the forest has quieted.

It's far too silent.

Like every creature knows something is not right. Even the trees, the bushes, and the grass seem to sense the wrongness.

It takes an eternity to turn, but only one heartbeat to understand.

The infamous golden monster has stopped playing with his cousins—has stopped bothering with them at all. Instead, those dark eyes lock on me. Emotions swirl in my chest, terror crashing into me like an icy wave and freezing every vein in my body.

Mariette is as still as stone at my side, her hand tight on my elbow. I don't think either of us breathe even while Greyson and Maverik start barking. Howling. Growling. They make endless noises as they dart in front of the dragon who's almost twice their size. They twist between his legs. They bite at his front paws, his back paws, and even at his tail.

They do all of this to no avail.

And when the dragon takes his first step toward me, when that giant paw slams on the ground, I feel it pounding on my soul. When those thick claws dig into the soil, I feel those talons wrap around my heart.

Those wolves, large as they are, powerful as they are, can do nothing to stop the King's Justice if his dragon is determined to eat me.

Those shadow-marked eyes stay on my face, stay on me.

Then one wolf sprints *away* from the dragon. I tremble. My knees weaken. If even Greyson thinks it's hopeless, what chance do I have? I turn to Mariette. She has to leave me behind.

Only a whimper comes out when I try to tell her, and it takes several swallows before I can finally speak.

"Run," I rasp. It's the only thing I can do—the only thing I can say.

She shakes so hard, her short brown hair quivers with her. But skies bless her, because Mariette shakes her head.

The flush of warmth pouring from her loyalty—her *stupid, idiotic, ridiculous, senseless* loyalty—nearly melts the ice of fear in my veins. Almost enough to push me into action.

Then a streak of white crosses my vision, and I sag with relief. Because Greyson is back.

Except he's not alone.

Sort of.

In his jaws is a body—presumably a Rebel from the camp, perhaps a friend of that first victim—slumped and immobile. Greyson is significantly larger than the body, but dragging it in his mouth looks awkward enough that he struggles with the dead weight while Maverik continues weaving through the dragon's thick legs. The dusty-grey wolf growls and barks, waving his long tail back and forth in an obvious attempt to get the dragon's attention.

Obvious to everyone except the dragon himself.

As the golden beast lifts a paw, Maverik stops.

The wolf looks me in the eye and growls. His pointed teeth, considerably larger than those of a natural-born's, are just as menacing as those in his cousin's jaws.

I shake my head; is he telling me to run or does he want us to stay still?

The dragon steps forward. The wolf snarls and jumps over to the white wolf, clamping his mouth on the body's arm. Together, Maverik and Greyson make quick work of dragging it at a much faster pace, dropping it directly in the dragon's path. I inhale sharply when I realize what they're doing.

Nausea mixes with the fear rolling through my stomach when both wolves slam one paw down on the body and tear it to pieces.

Mariette shudders and gasps.

I fight to stay calm.

As horrified as I am, and as guilty as I feel, relief keeps the rising terror at bay when the fresh…*kill* finally gets the dragon's attention.

Those dark eyes turn from me to the newly presented prey before him, and the loss of that gaze buckles my knees. I sag further, Mariette's hold the only thing keeping me upright.

Maverik's tail swishes low, the fur dragging across the debris on the forest floor as he stands over the kill. A low growl emanates from him, but he hops back and forth in a gesture I can only understand as an invitation for the dragon to play in some game understood only by the beasts.

Greyson does the same, dark-red tongue lolling out of his open mouth. The dragon looks between the two, and before my eyes every part of the golden dragon relaxes. The tension appears to melt from his coiled muscles, and his tail sways as his jaws open slightly.

Is it my imagination, or do even his eyes lighten?

Their game starts again.

Back and forth, the dragon and the wolves do their strange dance as Mariette and I stare at each other with our brows furrowed. Our eyes dart from the cousins to the woods at our backs—do we stay or do we dare moving again?

She jerks her chin at the blood seeping through the strings of my loose vest. I shake my head.

"I don't think I can move without bleeding more," I mouth.

Mariette purses her lips; it's obvious to her as well that something about my blood caught the dragon's attention.

Teeth snap, the loud sound disrupting our silent conversation. We turn. Her hand tightens around mine as we watch Greyson hop to the side, letting the dragon grab their prey and swallow it in one gulp.

Then both wolves do the same with the piece Maverik guards before the golden jaws sweep that up, too.

The dragon shakes his large head, collar tumbling down his neck and pointed teeth dripping crimson as he stomps, the thick claws digging into the ground and spraying dirt around him. His thick tail, corded with muscle, swishes behind him, low and slow.

His eyes search the area until they land on me.

Not black eyes.

Dark-gold eyes.

I hold my breath as shifter magic bursts from his body, the strands wrapping around his scales in a clash of silver and gold. They flow back and forth, whirling faster and faster until I can no longer see the shine of his monstrous, armoured scales.

When the dark silhouette of his broad form emerges from the magical threads, the massive form of his dragon disappears.

I exhale, heart hammering and hand pressed to my wound. Will he react to my blood again? Is the dragon still in control despite shifting back into his human form? Despite his eyes? The pain is almost intolerable now; it's hot and burning and I don't know whether I can escape if he decides he wants to drink me dry.

His face, thank the skies, is free of blood from what he'd consumed in his dragon form, but his eyes glow with a fierceness I can't understand. It's not hate…but it's not pure rage, either.

Maverik and Greyson shift as well, emerging alongside their cousin in record time. Their matching eyes glance warily at Kane, as if they're just as

apprehensive as I am.

But surely, I'm imagining it. Surely, they know their cousin well enough to predict what he'll do—especially if they've kept his dragon in line for at least a century, as the rumours say.

But their matching silver-grey eyes track Kane as he storms toward us—toward me. Though his steps aren't as heavy as they were when made by his dragon's talons, they're no less frightening.

Mariette shifts her weight and shuffles forward, forcing me to retreat so I'm half hidden by the boulder and half hidden behind her.

"Out of my way." Kane's voice is rough and gravelled, and it sends shivers racing past the fear even as my breath quickens at the storms raging in his eyes.

Mariette's hands clench into tight fists, shaking under the silence stones still binding her magic as she demands, "What do you want with her?"

He ignores the panther shifter, turning his narrowed gaze to me and sliding it down to my side. His nostrils flare, jaw ticking when he sees the blood barely stemmed by my red-slicked hand, lips curling in a sneer and baring his teeth as a low rumble emits from his chest.

Greyson and Maverik stride forward until they flank their cousin on each side. A silent conversation happens between the two, but I can't tell if they're preparing for something, or if it's Kane they're watching out for.

Kane brings his wrist to his lips. It comes away bloody, and my heart leaps into my throat.

The wolf shifters share a knowing look behind their cousin's back. Greyson's mouth parts as if he wants to say something, but whatever he had in mind, he keeps to himself as Kane brushes past Mariette without a second look at her. She stiffens, but Maverik takes her by the arm and pulls her out of the way. I swallow a groan, applying more pressure on the wound as I bite my lip and step back. Kane's eyebrow lifts in a mark of irritation before he closes the distance between us, and her muffled "Hey!" fades into the background as amber eyes fill my vision and my world.

His hand reaches up and past me. I flinch by instinct when warm fingers press against the sensitive skin at the back of my neck, but his touch is feather soft; his scent overwhelms my senses.

Although he's gentle, the pressure against my neck is firm as he pulls me toward him. I stumble clumsily, and sharp pain lances through my body

when my foot hits the ground. I gasp. He inhales sharply, nose flaring as warm blood gushes through my fingers.

The hand at my neck shifts, delicately tilting my head so I look up at him.

The gaze of the King's Justice is so soft, I feel like I can't breathe.

The warmth in his eyes surrounds me, soothing me and lulling me toward him, even as my mind struggles to remember who he is. What he's done.

But if he's such a monster, why is his touch so comforting?

His arm rises between us. My lips part to question him. His bloody wrist blocks most of my view, leaving only those gentle amber eyes to further confuse me as something warm and metallic invades my mouth.

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CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

Kane's grip on my neck tightens, holding me in place as he presses his bloody wrist to my parted lips, the spell broken.

My hands splay on his chest, pushing and pushing to get him away. But he must be made entirely of solid muscle, because my efforts are futile even when I pound at him with fists. My protests only garner bruises all along my hands, and I know they're not from the armour that molds and moves with him.

I try closing my mouth. He only shoves his wrist harder against my lips, forcing them to stay open. When I bite, the corners of his eyes crinkle, one brow rising in amusement as I realize it only makes him bleed more.

When he finally deems I've had enough, Kane releases his hold on me all at once. The sudden loss of his sure hands leaves me unbalanced, and I lose my footing as he steps back—though he doesn't put nearly enough distance between us—while Greyson reaches out and steadies me. I glare at Kane.

He smirks. "Looking lovely and crimson, aren't you?"

I'm baring my teeth, indignation and irritation rising at his bemusement; he's utterly unbothered by my bloody sneer. I spit, but it's not enough to remove the sweet, metallic tang from my tongue.

"Why do you keep doing that?" I growl.

He tilts his head. "Why do you keep getting hurt?"

"That's none of your business." I narrow my eyes, internally assessing the gash under my ribs and cursing when I realize it no longer bothers me. I don't have to put a hand to it to know it isn't bleeding anymore.

Kane’s expression darkens as he steps forward. I can’t retreat without pressing myself into Greyson, so I stand my ground. The jarring taste of his blood clashes with knowing the wound is no longer on my body, and the result is a whirlwind of emotions that only feeds the flames of my growing anger.

“Did we not say you were to stay put?” he asks, voice promising danger.

“Did we not say we needed more protection?” I shoot back. My lips curl higher. My eyes narrow further. My fists tremble at my side, aching to hit something. Wishing I were in The Cage, wishing I were facing him on even ground.

Again, he’s angry with me for something I didn’t do.

Again, he healed me against my will.

If only he were shiftless. I might not have fought people bigger or faster or more powerful than Kane, but if he weren’t a shifter, I’d have taken my chances against him.

I’d take a broken hand just to punch him in the face once.

“You wouldn’t have needed it if you had done what we’d told you to do!” He leans closer.

Maybe it’s stupid of me, but I don’t back down—I’m dreaming of slamming his head against my knee. I step closer and rise to my full height, looking up at his stupid, handsome face so full of the same wrath writhing in my own heart.

“If we had stayed put, we would have been *dead*!” I jab a finger into his stupid, rock-hard chest. “Do you even know what happened?”

“I only need to know you disobeyed a direct order and nearly got yourself killed,” he snarls, hot breath brushing my face with the anger of his words. “*Again.*”

I snort, rising onto my toes as if growling the words closer to his face might make his dumb brain finally understand. “So are you angry we nearly got ourselves killed, or are you angry we didn’t get the job done? Because, like I said, we would have *actually died* if we hadn’t run.”

“Don’t insult us with such pathetic lies, Crimson.” His chest rises and falls with his long, steady breaths while mine are as jagged as the tumbling of my heart. “You were trying to run—but you were trying to run from us.”

I laugh in his face, but it sounds strange and high pitched, even to me. “*That’s* what you think?”

“Kane—”

“Shut it,” he growls without even looking in Maverik’s way. In my periphery, Mariette grabs the wolf shifter’s arm and whispers in his ear.

“If we wanted to escape from you, we wouldn’t have run in your direction—or do you really think we’re that stupid?” I cock my head and place my hands on my hips.

Kane blinks.

“Brilliant plan to run from you, wasn’t it? To run directly toward you?” I sneer.

He narrows his eyes, studying me. I hope the expression on my face reflects the anger simmering in my heart—enough to burn even his dragon. “You’re an idiot and you were lost.”

I laugh again as Mariette’s words echo in my mind like a mantra of reassurance that Kane won’t kill me—that he needs me alive for whatever he has planned—and hope he didn’t heal me just to kill me himself. I hope to the skies she’s right as I say my next taunt. “Maybe listen to what your cousin has to say, and then you might—just might—realize you’re the idiot.”

Greyson groans and drags a hand down his face.

Kane doesn’t turn from me. “Because of you, we had to kill everyone at the camp. They were our best lead on the red-eyed Rebels.”

My eyes widen. He smirks, but it’s bittersweet.

“You cost us a month’s worth of work, Crimson. We were going to take prisoners and interrogate them. We could have finally found their source. You remember what they did—what they can do—don’t you?”

Memories of that night rush back. The violence. The blood. No amount of blinking pushes them away.

But I also remember *him* that night. He was just as violent. Just as bloody. Maybe even worse, because he drank straight from Shelley when she’d done nothing to deserve any of it.

“You didn’t have to kill them all,” I snarl quietly. “You could have stopped at any time.” I turn from him and look his cousins in their eyes. “You all could have stopped at any time.”

When I meet Kane’s gaze once more, his smile turns sad, filled with something I can’t quite understand. Regret, maybe?

“No, we couldn’t have.” He shakes his head slowly, finally leaning back and giving me space. “That’s why you should have stayed put.”

“And I said we couldn’t!” I surprise even myself when I follow him, invading his space. “How many times do I have to say it before it finally gets through your thick skull?”

“Maybe just once more, Red.” He bares his teeth in a challenge.

I don’t know what he’s daring me to do, but I rise to the taunt and punch him.

Kane catches my fist with one hand. He doesn’t even blink.

I press my chest against his. “My name is Scarlet.”

“Skies, just tell her!” Greyson barks.

We both startle at the sudden outburst. Kane releases my hand, and I pull it back as if he’d burned me.

“Tell me what?” I turn to the weary, silver-haired shifter. He sighs heavily and glances at Kane.

A low rumble emits from Kane. I’m still close enough to feel it in the air, heated by the warmth radiating from his body.

“Tell me what?” I snap.

Kane steps back, and I have the sense not to follow this time. Instead, I study his strong, lithe form as he drags a hand through his messy, black hair. Twice.

“Well?” I cross my arms and tap my foot for good measure. Mariette stares from me to the King’s Justice with pursed lips, looking nearly as tired as Greyson. Maverik seems barely able to bite back a smile.

My irritation grows.

If the Three don’t kill me for my insolence, I might just die of frustration, anyway.

The dragon shifter takes a deep breath and exhales for a long time before finally speaking. Fixing me with a glare holding absolutely no bite, he mumbles, “Your blood…sends my dragon into a frenzy.”

My foot stops halfway in the air. I blink.

“What do you mean into a frenzy?” I ask, uncertain if I actually want the answer anymore. “He…wants to drink my blood?”

He drags another hand through his dark hair, making pieces of it stick up at odd angles. For once, he refuses to make eye contact, casting his golden irises anywhere but at me. “Something about you drives my dragon mad. It’s difficult enough to keep his thirst for blood under control under the best of circumstances, but every time you bleed, he thrashes against what little dominance I have.”

“But…but…” I struggle to find the words, my mind emptying even of my previous anger. “What about the…Didn’t your uncle help you?”

Kane sighs and lifts a finger to the high neck of the dark shirt beneath his black armour. With both hands, he pulls the fabric down to reveal a—

“A collar,” I say numbly, unable to understand what my eyes are seeing. Around Kane’s neck, beneath the cloth collar of his shirt, is a thin strip of black material—a leather version of the cuffs around Mariette’s wrists. But, whereas her shackles feature only one silence stone each, the collar around Kane bears at least four of the dull, black gems all along the front.

Maverik shifts his weight from one foot to the other as the other wolf shifter crosses his arms. Mariette’s jaw drops, but she quickly regains her composure, schooling her expression to hide the surprise.

I’m not so elegant. “You…wear a silencing collar?”

“This is how he helped me.” Kane looks away as he unrolls the neck of his shirt, hiding the strip of leather. “The best he could do was infuse magic from ancient artifacts with the silencing powers of the stones. Together, they do a decent enough job of silencing my dragon.” His golden eyes slide back to me as his lips tilt in a crooked smirk. “Until you bleed.”

It takes several tries before I can respond.

“But if you’ve silenced his bloodthirst…” A pit of discomfort opens in my chest as his smile grows, though his eyes remain dark and sombre. “Then you’ve silenced your dragon’s powers, too. How are you able to shift and use your dragon’s magic?”

Kane dips his head until his face is level with mine. “What is it about you and your blood, hm?”

His closeness, his scent, his mixed expressions of fury and regret—it’s all too much. I reel back.

“You haven’t answered my question.”

He reaches out, hand settling once more around the back of my neck as he leans closer.

He takes a deep breath. When I look up at him, his eyes are closed. As if savouring the scent of his next meal.

It’s worse when he opens them, because his golden gaze meets mine, daring me to watch as he leaves a burning path across my skin—his eyes trailing down to my lips, my neck, and my rising chest.

I swallow. He glances at my bobbing throat, his head tilting. Considering a bite.

“N-no.”

“No to what, Bloody Carmine?” His whispered words brush softly against my cheek.

“No, you can’t have my blood,” I croak.

His chest vibrates as he hums, dipping his head lower until his nose traces the line of my jaw. I shiver, thinking of his blood-coated fangs—both his human fangs and his dragon ones.

When Kane suddenly draws back, I inhale sharply from the immediate loss of heat, silently cursing myself for regretting its absence—his absence. He is *danger*, not *attraction*.

But my head won’t listen to reason as I look up into golden eyes shining with the glint of lust. His mouth quirks, and my traitorous mind wonders what it would be like to bite that smirk.

“That’s why they had to die, Crimson.” His nose flares. He blinks, straightening. “All of them.”

Skies, I’d forgotten that was what we were talking about.

I swallow the lump firmly stuck in my throat and squeeze my legs together, forcing the heat in my core to cool into ice.

“Fine,” I rasp and point at his neck. “That collar I can understand. Even the…effects of my blood, I can understand. Sort of. But that doesn’t change the fact Mariette and I had to run.”

His eyes narrow.

“Someone threw something at us. An explosive.” I’m proud my voice gains steadiness with each word until I sound almost as unaffected as he looks. “We were doing exactly as you’d said, but when the trees exploded and the dust cleared to reveal some contraption in the centre of a small crater, we couldn’t stay and wait for them to find us.”

“Them as in who?” he growls, every trace of emotion changing into something else entirely.

“Them as in whoever was aiming for us. Someone had to have thrown it.” I place my hands on my hips and glare up at him.

“She makes a good point,” Maverik interjects, startling me. He grins. “Did you forget we were here?”

“No.” I hate my cheeks for warming. “I was just starting to think you’d never stand up to your idiot of a leader.”

“Who says he’s our—”

“No one escaped the camp,” Kane says.

My brows rise. “Someone clearly did.” I pull at the torn and bloody parts of my shirt with one hand and gesture at the loose strings of my vest with the other.

“I mean no one escaped the camp before you were hurt,” he amends roughly.

I snort. “As if you could have known when I got hurt.”

Greyson coughs. Maverik covers his mouth.

“I knew.” Kane crosses his arms.

I lift an eyebrow. “You…knew?”

He nods slowly. “I knew.”

“You knew.” My heart stutters, an uncomfortable warmth spreading in my chest even as I tamp it down.

Don’t be foolish. He doesn’t care about me *as a person.*

“He knew the minute you were hurt,” Maverik snickers. “The literal minute.”

Greyson cocks his head. “Well, maybe the minute the wind changed.”

The other wolf shifter agrees.

I look down, suddenly fascinated by the dirt marks on the toes of my shoes. My blood hums in my veins. “That strong, huh?”

“That strong.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you. Someone threw it. Things exploded. We had to run.” I shrug then square my shoulders, using my last bit of courage to meet his eyes again. “Otherwise, we wouldn’t be standing here arguing.”

A small smile spreads on Kane’s face. “Like idiots.”

I consider the possibility my heart must have suffered an injury, because it flutters as I nod. “Like idiots.”

The moment of silence blanketing us feels lighter than what it was. I peer up at Kane, strangling the part of me that suddenly feels shy. “So you believe me?”

His brows pull together and he crosses his arms, looking at his cousin. “Maverik?”

The mountain of a shifter shakes his head and chuckles. “We saw the crater ourselves.”

“Fine.” Kane’s biceps flex, but the previous hostility is gone from his gaze as he glances at me from the corners of his eyes. “But you just had to go and nearly die. Again.”

Irritation flashes through me, but it’s quickly replaced by the realization he believes me. It took his cousin’s confirmation for him to do so, but it still means something to me. I’m not ready to explore why, so I lean into the acceptance and let fatigue take over.

Sighing at the surrounding wreckage, my shoulders droop as I stare at my blood-crusted hands. “Is there somewhere I can bathe?”

Thank the skies the horses were fine—as it turns out, they’re so well trained, the Three don’t bother with actually tying them; they’d done so only for show—because we’re already riding into the next city by early afternoon. Despite my exhaustion, I stay awake all the way into Wynbrook’s borders and even as we approach an inn.

Mariette and I stand near the back while the cousins make arrangements with the innkeeper. The stout man obviously knows who he’s dealing with—he nearly sweats through his clothes during the exchange.

I lean against the old but well-kept wall, looking longingly at the plush seats in front of the fireplace. Most of the inn’s interior is in similar condition, and the only thing keeping me from sinking into the soft seats is the thought of having to stand again. Between the riding and the attack and Kane’s unconventional method of healing, my body is so sore, I’m confident it would hurt less to stay standing. To distract myself from thinking of my aching everything, I focus on the pieces of art hanging along the sides of the fireplace. They’re similar to decorations typically seen in inns, featuring the valiant history of the Selerune family, their decline into madness, and the rise of King Waylon.

Most towns feature the story in one way or another, but this is a depiction I’ve never seen before; on the panel illustrating a war between two groups of dragon shifters, each led by a king in his dragon form, there’s a figure at one dragon’s side. The figure looks female, though her portrayal is so scratched away, I can barely tell the flow of her skirts. At her feet, more scratches cover something else I can’t discern.

I lean in and peer closer, but the inn’s front door opens, ringing the bell at the top of the door and drawing my attention from the art. Four travellers enter. With one look at the King’s Three, they immediately shuffle back in

retreat, leaving the inn with muttered apologies. Maverik turns to us and grins, giving us a thumbs-up.

Despite their horrible reputation and what we've seen and experienced so far, I can't deny the cracks they've already put in my armour of isolation.

I'd missed the smirks and laughs and inside jokes that come with regular companionship. It'd been so long since I'd been with all three of my siblings, I must have forced myself to forget what it was like in order to survive.

Survive the debt.

Survive the winters.

Survive the loneliness.

My sore heart knows this, too, is not forever. This—whatever it is—with the King's Three is a means to an end; it's not real friendship, and they are each other's family. Not mine. Not that being family had made a difference with mine. Maverik is all smiles and jokes because he's a jovial person. Greyson is kind because he's the more compassionate and sympathetic of the three. Kane is desperate to keep me alive not because he likes me, but because he needs me.

The best I can hope for is that Mariette would like to remain friends once this is all over. Once we've earned our freedom.

But for now, I can allow myself to enjoy the small moments of friendship. The little signs of camaraderie. The spaces between the instants of knowing I belong.

I return Maverik's smile with a little wave.

Then I see the single key dangling from his hand.

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CHAPTER

NINETEEN

"What do you mean this is our room?" I stare at the single door in which Maverik turns a key.

The wolf shifter lifts a shoulder and jerks a thumb over his shoulder. "Ask him."

I turn slowly to Kane.

He doesn't bother with looking at me as he answers, "Given your inclination for trying to die, we're taking extra precautions."

My jaw drops when we walk into the room. While it is the biggest room I've ever been in, it's also only big enough for three beds.

Kane shoulders past us and drops a bundle onto the ground, kicking it open before crouching to lay out two of the bedrolls we'd used outdoors.

"I'm going to wash up," he says as he stands and strides out of the room. "Find food."

The door clicks closed, and I turn to Greyson and Maverik, who both shake their heads and shrug.

"There's no bathing room here?" Mariette walks around the rolls on the ground and flings open the single door facing the beds. "It's just a powder room?"

"Yes, but you will be delighted to know this particular inn is our favourite in these parts of Selerune because of its hot pools." Greyson sets his bags at the foot of the bed farthest from the entrance and next to the double window, a large smile on his face.

"And the best part is, word spreads fast when we arrive in a city, meaning the pools will be empty and our relaxation will be uninterrupted." Maverik sighs, closing his eyes.

I rub my arm, pausing as the stiffened cloth of my sleeve brushes against my skin. A bath, especially a hot one, sounds like an absolute dream.

Maverik drops his bags next to the bed closest to the door, the thump dragging me out of the beginnings of daydreams about cleaning. “But I’m starving.”

Greyson nods.

“W-wait,” I stutter, flushing when I realize I’m the only one so heavily encrusted by dirt and blood. Even Mariette, who spent almost as much time imprisoned, is cleaner. “Can we go to the hot pools first?”

The panther shifter starts to agree, but her stomach protests the idea and she turns apologetic eyes my way.

“You can go,” Greyson says gently. “It’s down the hall that way. We’re on the third and highest floor of the inn, so just go down the same stairs we came up. When you get to the main floor, turn right instead of left. There are signs directing you to the pools from there.”

“I’ll head into the city with them to find food and make sure they get us some new clothes.” Mariette’s voice floats into the room as she strides into the bathroom. “In the meantime, you can wear this.”

A beige bundle flies from the open door, landing on the middle bed.

“Ah yes,” Maverik says as he picks up the first item, lifting it to let the towel unroll. From his other hand hangs a robe with a long tie. “I’d forgotten about these. Not bad, I suppose.”

“Better than what I’m wearing now,” I mutter, snatching both from him. Skies, the material is soft.

“Right.” The wolf shifter scratches at his cheek, looking sheepishly from me to the clean robe and towel I’m too afraid to clutch to my chest for fear of dirtying them. “Yeah, we’ll get you something.”

“Thank you,” I say, suddenly shy. “But I don’t…”

I have no marks. Nothing to give in exchange—what little I had is all back in Grengrove, and that’s likely been divided amongst the townspeople.

Maverik reties his hair, slicking the loose pieces back into the tail at the nape of his neck. “Don’t worry about it. You’re with us, which means we’ll take care of you.”

I bite my lip. They don’t have to do this; we’re their prisoners. Even if they have a reason for keeping me alive, they aren’t under any obligation to make sure I’m clothed and comfortable.

“You remember the directions?” Greyson asks.

I clear my throat. “Yeah. I do. Thank you.”

“Well, we’re heading out. Take a key with you before going. If you get back before we do and Kane asks where we are, tell him if he didn’t want to eat what we had last time, he should have gone to get his own food.” Maverik waves; the door looks smaller than it really is when the large shifters stalk past the frame. Mariette is the last to leave, but she gives me a small wave and an even smaller smile as she goes.

“Good luck,” I mouth.

“You too,” she responds silently.

Those three must have arrived at some sort of understanding; she’s significantly more comfortable around them. Though, I will admit that between Kane and his cousins, I would much rather spend time with the wolves instead of the dragon.

I close the door and lock it behind me before dropping the key into one of the robe’s pockets. The stairs are straightforward, but when I get to the main floor, I question whether I’d taken a wrong turn.

“There aren’t any signs,” I mutter. “I turned right instead of turning left, but there are no signs.”

Greyson’s instructions had seemed simple enough, but it seems I’ve overestimated my ability to navigate while exhausted. When I finally make my way back to the hall near the main entrance, I’m relieved to hear the innkeeper’s voice.

Just as I step out of the shadows to ask for directions, snippets of the man’s conversation float toward me.

“…it’s a curse, I tell ya,” says the innkeeper.

I retreat into the hall and press myself against the wall, safely hidden from view.

“What about?” asks the dark-haired woman across the counter.

“Sure, we’re the best inn of Wynbrook. But what good is that if I have to chase customers away at the drop of a hat just so the wicked Three get their privacy?” the innkeeper sputters. “No one knows when they’ll come, so it scares away potential guests, too.”

From his tone, I imagine he’s shaking his head.

“They do pay well, at least?” asks a masculine voice I can’t see.

The woman chuckles. “If they pay at all.”

“They do pay, but again, what good is that when it tarnishes my reputation? And to think, I once thought it an honour to host the King’s Three.” The innkeeper snorts.

“Don’t let them hear you say that!” the man says.

All three laugh, but it’s not friendly nor welcoming laughter.

Their conversation devolves into complaints about other guests, so I slink away and back into the shadows. The innkeeper might direct me to the hot pools, but my instincts say he won’t be of help.

This time when I arrive at the end of the hallway, I catch a glimpse of what might have once been a sign nestled beneath another painting of some historical battle involving dragons, wolves, and other shifters. At first glance, the wooden sign seems to explain the old artwork. Upon a closer look, I discover directions to the hot pools.

“But I did go that way,” I grumble as I retrace my steps down the other hall. At least the interior is nice to look at; even for an inn proclaimed as the city’s best, it doesn’t match up to the grandeur of the Selerune Castle. Of course, it’s still better than anything I’d ever seen prior.

The halls are dim, but in a way that encourages comfort rather than implying poverty. Rows of doors line each side, similar to the third floor where our room is located. Are the rooms filled, or did the innkeeper have to send everyone away, like he’d complained? It seems both foolish and a waste to empty the inn just for three men, but I’ve never lived the life of luxury they experience daily, and I certainly doubt they’ve ever visited a town as small as Grengrove.

I reach the end of the hall and huff when I face stairs once again. Surely, I’m close? I consider going back to ask the innkeeper, but I decide against it. The inn is big, but it’s not that big. Even as tired as I am, I’d rather wander on my own. Then I notice a painting on the wall. Beneath it is another sign similar to the one I saw earlier, so I lean in for a closer look.

“Aha!” I whisper.

The plaque bears not the title of the artwork, but carvings so worn by time, I barely make out the arrow pointing in the opposite direction of the stairs, as well as the words *Hot Pools*.

Turning, my brows furrow at the closed door until I realize its doorknob is different from those lining the hall. When I place my hand on the handle, it turns without resistance.

“Ah!” I whisper. “I may be an idiot, but I got here eventually.”

The difference in the air is immediate as soon as the door opens; despite higher humidity, the lanterns on the wall—dimmer than those in the halls—appear healthy without signs of flickering out.

The lighting promotes relaxation, so even with the multitude of lanterns brightening the steep stairs, I see barely ten paces ahead. I take a big breath and shrug to myself, taking the first step down the wooden stairs while keeping one hand on the railing.

Beneath my worn shoes, the steps turn to stone as the sound of water reaches my ears. Excitement bubbles in my chest as I imagine sinking into hot water and finally scrubbing the past weeks from my skin.

I bite my lip as my foot reaches the last step. Has it only been two weeks? I've lost track of time in the chaos of all that has happened. Even the momentary joy of finally having earned my freedom feels like it happened to someone else.

It was me, but it also wasn't.

I step off at the bottom of the stairs to face a large wooden panel, presumably for the semblance of privacy. But they seemed confident we're alone in the inn, so I turn the corner and follow the wall lanterns, walking into a large, rectangular room; the dim lighting is the only reason I can tell where the chamber ends on either side—everything between is shrouded in steam and shadows.

Standing on wet stone worn smooth by time, water, and use, I squint into the darkness. The entire room appears to be part of the hot pool, with a walking path stretching along the wall closest to me. By the wall sits two barely lit benches as well as what looks to be storage for towels and robes, so I place my clean items there, glancing at the curling steam as I reach for what I hope to be slippers for anyone's use—there are rows of them, but I'm the only one here.

I can't wait to slip into the hot water quietly lapping at the edge of the stone floor in front of me, but I sit on the wooden bench—surprisingly dry—and take my time removing my old shoes for fear they might fall apart.

The person who wore these shoes the night I was taken from Grengrove is not the same person I am now.

The person who weathered the storms of her adoptive parents dying, her siblings abandoning her one by one, and who bore the brunt of physical fighting matches just to survive—I'm not that person anymore.

Removing the final lace of my second boot and running my thumb over the patches I'd had to learn to apply in order to repair them, I finally place it down next to its twin—neatly, unlike the chaos I've seen since. Unlike the death Shelley suffered.

In my heart, I know the owl shifter was not truly a friend. She was friendly, but we hadn't known each other long enough to earn the reaction I'd experienced from her brutal murder. If I had to guess—if I allowed myself to think on it—I'd say my visceral response was from having been stripped of everything I knew just when I thought my life was finally starting. I felt I couldn't afford to lose any more. Not a friend, not a person, not anything.

But that amulet did something to me.

My head has been buzzing on and off since. I've ignored it as stress, but now I'm not so sure. While shifter magic didn't affect me much before, it was subtle enough that only my siblings had noticed, and even then, they never thought much of it. Turning into a cat only further confirms something has changed.

Even if it protected me from Kane's dragon fire, I don't know how it happened, and more importantly, how I changed back.

Being a cat is bad enough, but if this cat thing is why Kane needs me alive, it can't be good for me.

In the darkness of the chamber, I only see as far as the silhouette of the hand I hold out in front of me. When I fold my fingers, a fist forms because it's my hand, my fingers. But the things these hands have done make them unrecognizable to me in times like this—moments of silence when my head is loudest.

I can't see the dried blood caked around my nails, nor can I see the dirt encrusted in the lines of my palms.

But my mind recalls the memories of the things I've done; the people I've hurt—whether in the name of repaying my debt or from fear of having to traverse this terrifying journey with the King's Three on my own.

Peeling my clothes off feels like I'm peeling off the final remnants of who I was—the Scarlet whose only problems were figuring out where my next mark will come from to fulfill Spencer's next payment. Getting ready to wash feels like getting ready to wash away everything I thought I'd known and wanted.

I drop the ripped shirt and step out of the tatters of my pants, bare foot landing on the wet stone. Everything's changed, but I'm still me. I'd always dreamed of freedom, and I still yearn for it now.

Except the payment is far more expensive, and the risk is now my life.

I slip into the water.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY

Stone stairs lead me into the hot water's embrace. Each step lowers me until I stand chest-deep in the warmth. I walk toward the pool's edge, pleasantly surprised to find a stone bench to sit on, so I sink into the seat and sigh as the water laps at my skin, the delicious heat hugging each part of my body and unwinding the knots formed in my muscles from the labour, the riding, and the stress. At the pool's edge is a small basket of soaps, but I lean back instead, resting my head against the stone floor as I stare up at the white steam curling into the air, obstructing my view of the ceiling.

The humid heat is almost oppressive, but I like it. It gives me a sense of security and stability, and though I know it's false, I close my eyes and let myself pretend.

I pretend I'm a normal, paying guest enjoying a dip in the hot pool.

I pretend my debts never existed, and I'm not risking my life for a pardon.

I pretend I'm here because I want to be.

Just for a moment, I let myself pretend I'm okay.

Without opening my eyes, I grab a bar of soap. Submerging my head beneath the water, I scrub my face and dig my fingers into my scalp, letting my past wash away with the dirt.

When I can't hold my breath any longer, I emerge and take a long, gasping breath of air. Even in the darkness, I can tell my hands are already cleaner. A bittersweet smile pulls at my lips, and I submerge myself a second time, scrubbing and cleaning and washing until my lungs burn.

When I rise a second time, I really do feel a little more okay.

The chamber is just bright enough to tell the pool drains on one end while more hot water pours in from the other, though I can't see either while I work at rinsing the rest of my body, humming as my spirits lift with each speck of dirt swirling away from me.

I imagine I'm shedding the skin of my past so I can grow stronger to bear what's to come, and while I wish I didn't have to do this, I know I can.

After having scrubbed off at least two layers and finally feeling more like a person, I return to the stone bench, place the remains of the soap into the basket, and rest my head on the pool's edge to enjoy the heat, hoping it will ease more tension from my weary body.

"You have to be the most unaware person I've ever had the misfortune of meeting."

My eyes snap open, and it's all I can do to keep myself from rising and exposing myself entirely.

"Wh-what?" I stutter, looking around and cursing the thick mist. Even as the question tumbles from my mouth, I already know the answer. "Who's there?"

"Disappointing. I thought I'd made an impression." Kane's voice rumbles from deep in the chamber, curling around me like the steam still blocking him from view.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, crossing my arms despite remaining underwater.

Do I have time to rush out and grab my things?

Will he stop me from leaving?

I flinch internally as a more insidious question sneaks into my mind.

Do I want to leave?

The sound of water refilling the pool mixes with the splashes of someone moving through it. I hold my breath as his silhouette appears, dark and contrasting the white clouds.

"Same as you, I'd imagine." He emerges from the mist and I hiss, sinking deeper into the water and cursing myself for being unable to drag my eyes from his naked, muscular body. "Cleansing myself of the day's sins."

The way he says that last word sends shivers down my spine despite the heat of the water. My gaze snags on the black collar hanging loosely around his throat, tracing a thick scar following the curve of his neck down to the top of his left shoulder. The lines of muscles on his broad shoulders and

across his powerful chest. Curse the light of this chamber for being bright enough to see exactly how strong this man is.

Curse the skies for being so cruel as to allow such a vile and ruthless man to look as good as he does.

“You like what you see?” His purred question stops me in my tracks, keeping my gaze from slipping down his defined abdomen. As my mind wonders whether those muscles might be hard enough to clean even my soiled clothes, I force my lips to pull into a sneer.

“What I would like is to be alone in the pool,” I hiss.

He steps closer to me, and the traitorous water laps at his waist, revealing the corded muscles by his hips. I sink deeper into the pool and snap my eyes up to glare at him, crossing my arms tighter around myself even though I’m sure he can’t see me.

He gives me a crooked smile—the grin of a man who knows just how good he looks—as he stares down at me. “You’d like to wash the blood from your hands, Red?”

In an attempt to quell the heat building rapidly in my core, I let my temper flare instead. “It’s Scarlet, and you damn well know it.”

His smirk widens. “Do I?”

“Yes, you do. I’d appreciate if you were to use my name.”

“Scarlet, Crimson, Red. It’s all the same, isn’t it?” He cocks his head as he makes his way to the edge of the pool. For a moment, I can’t decide if I want him to rise and reveal himself to me or whether I’d prefer for him to stay where he is. What I do know is I lost my mind.

“They may be shades of red, but my name is Scarlet.” I force my eyes to stay on his, just to find the dim lighting only makes those dark-amber eyes even more mesmerizing.

Curse the skies.

“Bloody Scarlet’s a shade of red.”

I stiffen, the old name jarring from the mouth of the King’s Justice. I never liked it before, but for a reason I don’t care to explore, it’s worse coming from him.

Which is ridiculous, considering the things I’ve heard he’s done.

The things I’ve seen him do.

“Don’t like that one?” He takes a seat on my stone bench, leaving only one person’s width between us as he drops an arm over the edge of the pool,

disrupting the water. I exhale the thought of his fingers brushing my skin instead of the water lapping at my neck.

I swallow and shake my head, cursing everything and everyone for being affected by something so inane. It's stupid. I'm stupid.

Instead of admitting it out loud, I say, "My name is Scarlet, and I prefer to be called Scarlet."

"My name is Kane, and I prefer to call you whatever I want." His fingers tap the stone where I'm just out of reach, his gaze tracing my face. "Considering you're my prisoner."

My mouth dries. I swallow.

I refuse to acknowledge the heat building between my legs, and I swear the shiver racing down my spine is from a chill cutting through the humid air.

My breath hitches because I'm vulnerable and afraid. Because I'm alone with the King's Justice, where no one will hear me—not because there's the flicker of desire in his eyes.

Not. At. All.

"Why?" I ask, shifting back to put at least the semblance of distance between us.

The scar on his eyebrow moves with his grin. "You were the one who insisted—*begged*—to join us."

"That's not what I meant. Why do you refuse to call me by my name?" I pull my arms tighter around myself, hating the quiver that slips into my voice. My name is all I have; it's the only thing that cannot abandon me. Even though Scarlet is a name given to me by someone else, it's the only thing I have left. The only thing truly mine.

He blinks lazily at me, keeping his elbow on the stone while dipping his hand into the water.

My gaze drifts back to the collar still on his neck. "Do you really want to drink my blood?"

His smile freezes, and for one heartbeat, I worry I've said the wrong thing. No one would hear if he were to kill me and dispose of my body. No one would even inquire after my disappearance.

Maybe Mariette, but she has her own safety to consider.

Kane fixes me with a stare as if I should already know the answer, and I hastily add, "Your dragon, I mean. Does he really want my blood?"

He blinks again, dropping his head against the pool's edge like I did earlier. Relaxing like I can't relax now. "He wants all blood, but yes." He rolls his head to look at me, crooked smile still in place. "Yours in particular."

"Why?" I whisper, my heart racing partly from fear and partly—to my disgust—from excitement. Maybe he's right; maybe I do have a death wish. What kind of sick, broken creature hears a dragon wants to drink her blood and feels aroused? Who wouldn't run screaming?

Something shutters what playfulness was in his eyes, leaving a sombre expression as dark as the chamber. He sighs. "I wish I knew, Burgundy."

The name is so sudden, I snort, eyebrows knitting in disbelief. "That's a new one."

"Don't like that one, either?" The smile doesn't reach his eyes.

"Scarlet. Please."

"All right, Amaranth."

I roll my eyes.

"Do you always keep the…collar on?" The word is hard to say out loud; I've been shackled and Mariette is still silenced, but seeing the dull gems across the throat of the King's Justice seems worse.

I lift my gaze from the band of black around his neck to study the side profile of his face and the scar running down to his eyebrow. His eyes blink open, the dark amber staring up at nothing.

"Always." His throat bobs. He says the word as if it's the most awful word in existence.

For one breath, I share the sentiment.

He turns back to me and I freeze, horrified to realize I'm reaching for him.

Shadowed gold looks at my outstretched hand and traces my arm up to my face where our eyes meet, and his gaze lingers.

"But especially now," he says, voice rough and thick.

I draw my hand back and wrap my arms around myself again, a spark of irritation rising in my chest to match the flare of anger igniting in his eyes.

"How is that my fault?" I snap, because irritability is safer than whatever's brewing in the far depths of my mad mind.

"You keep trying to die," he says with a scoff.

"How many times have I told you that was not my fault?" Frustration stokes the irritation into something brighter. Stronger.

Safer.

“Both times?”

“Both times!”

“Thanks to you, we didn’t get any of the answers we were hoping for.” He straightens, keeping one arm draped over the edge as he turns to face me fully. “That was our best chance in a long time. One stupid, inconsiderate move from you, and all of it was gone. All that blood is on your hands.”

“You ate them all!” My voice rises as I see red. Red from anger. Red from the blood he’d spilled. “I was just trying to survive.”

The blood *he’d* spilled.

Not me.

“I was going to let you off easy,” Kane says, face twisting with anger. “I was going to let you two go if you survived the stone retrievals. Now, I have half a mind to make you fix your mistake.”

“My mistake?” I huff. “What a joke. Might I remind you once more you were the one who *ate all of your prisoners*?”

“Because you went and bled everywhere!” he snarls, eyes widening. “You went and got yourself nearly killed—*again*—and your damned blood drove my dragon mad. I shifted because of you!”

“Everyone shifts!” I roar back. “Everyone except me! So don’t blame me for your problems when I don’t even know what yours is!”

“You’re my problem,” he growls. “You and your blood and your penchant for dying.”

“Then I’ll help you get your precious information.” I rise and turn, slamming my palms onto the stone and pushing myself out of the water. Then I drop onto the edge, sitting and facing him with the full force of my anger, my legs still dangling in the pool. I don’t care I’m naked. I don’t care he can see everything. I don’t feel vulnerable—I feel rage. If the skies had put us on even ground, I’d have beaten him and escaped the first chance I got. “I’ll help you find another Rebel camp, help you get your prisoners, *and* I’ll get your silence stones. Then we can be free of each other once and for all, and you’ll never have to smell my damned blood again!”

I twist to leave, but as my knees rest on the stone, a hand wraps around my ankle, keeping me in place.

When I turn to yell at him, my heart stops at the raw hunger plain upon his face.

His nostrils are flared, his lips slightly parted. Unbridled desire burns in his molten gaze.

My own lust roars to life, heat pooling unbearably hot in my core.

He doesn't even try to hide the action as he leans closer, inhaling deeply while his right hand reaches around me to grab the stone edge and cage me in.

"Fuck," he growls, voice even rougher and lower than before. He releases my ankle. I turn as he traces my leg, pausing over the ridges of a scar on my thigh before rising higher and higher until his hand rises from the water. Then, it's only the heat of his fingers warming my bare skin.

Sitting at the edge of the pool, we're nearly face to face. He closes his eyes and leans another inch closer, inhaling long and hard.

"Fuck," he growls again, the word rumbling in the space between us.

My heart hammers so fast, I'm surprised he can't hear it. Or maybe he can, but he's too distracted.

"Do you even know what you smell like?" Kane dips his head and presses his face into the crook of my neck.

I stifle a gasp when he nuzzles the sensitive skin. The sensation of his nose brushing along my neck and his hand gripping my thigh makes my head spin. I bite my lip to swallow a rising groan.

"What?" I rasp instead. "What do I smell like?"

He hums. I shudder.

"Do I smell like everything you hate?" I squeeze my eyes shut and focus on each word as his hand trails up my thigh. "Do I smell like everything you never want to see again?"

Tracing my jaw with his nose and inhaling like he'll never breathe again, his right hand grabs my other leg. He roughly pushes my knees apart.

I pant, wanting to tell him off.

Wanting to reprimand him.

Wanting him.

Kane grips my hips and steps between my legs.

Then he presses his hot tongue along my racing pulse, and I can't hold back a moan.

His fingers dig into my hips, his mouth sucking on the spot his tongue had been.

I gasp and see stars as I try to squeeze my legs together. But his hands return to my knees and force them farther apart.

“You do smell like everything I hate.” Kane inhales deeply, his hot breath skittering across my skin. “You smell like everything I never wanted to see. Everything I never wanted to know.”

A prickle of hurt cuts through the fog of lust, and I press my hands onto his hard chest, trying to push him away.

But it’s like trying to push a wall, and he stays firmly in place.

I yelp at the sudden sharp pain blossoming on my neck. “You bit me—”

The last syllable leaves my mouth as another wanton moan when he slides his tongue over the spot he’d nipped. Even without breaking skin, over and over, he soothes the hurt.

“But now that I’ve met you, I can’t get you out of my head. You’re always here. Always on my mind. Always enraging my dragon.” He runs his hands up my sides, tracing my form and setting fire to every part of me. His fingers catch on another scar. I almost tell him to ignore it, but his touch turns tender as he tracks its length before starting again from my hips, dragging his warm hands up and down as if memorizing how I feel.

It takes everything I have not to melt in his arms.

“I hate you too,” I rasp, screwing my eyes shut to focus on the words instead of his touch.

“I wish I’d never met you,” he groans, lifting a hand to the back of my head and grabbing a fistful of hair. “Skies, I wish I’d never *smelled* you.”

I can’t reply, my breaths coming in faster and faster as my core grows slicker with each moment—each word.

“Now I know what your skin tastes like.” Kane growls, inhales again, and lifts his head to meet my eyes. His golden gaze is hazy with lust and anger, and I’m embarrassed to admit I’m no better. Powerful hands drag their way back down to my hips. “Now I know what your arousal smells like.”

“What about it?” My words are barely intelligible even to me.

His chest rumbles. In one motion, he lifts me and flips me, setting my feet on the stone bench. With my legs in the water up until my knees and the rest of me above the pool and facing away from him, he’s given himself the perfect view of just how much he affects me. My hands slap against the ground as I turn to look back at him. After the heat of the water, the air is cool against my thighs, and I barely suppress another moan.

He doesn’t notice me looking at him; the King’s Justice has pure hunger in his eyes as he stares at my slick entrance like a starving man gazing upon

his personal feast.

I'm turned on, but I haven't forgotten that spark of anger flickering between the lust and need. So I wiggle my desire in his face just to see his eyes darken and his mouth part. Just to see I'm the one doing this to him.

"Now I'll know what you feel like." His voice drops even lower.

Pleasure explodes at my core, and I fight to keep my eyes from rolling back as his finger slams into me.

"Now I'll know what you feel like when you come on my hand," he says roughly, one hand firm on my thigh and holding me up as the other works me over and over.

"You…aren't that…good." I pant even as a whimper escapes.

"You smell like I am." He adds another finger, and I nearly collapse.

He reaches around me and pinches the sensitive spot between my legs. I moan with abandon.

"Not…"

He adds a third finger, and I can't fight it any longer.

I forget every word.

My eyes screw shut from the pleasure. His fingers fill me in a way I've never felt—not from another's hands nor any person at all. If his one hand makes me feel this way, how will I survive *him*?

He rolls my swollen bud with the thumb and forefinger of one hand. His other slams into me faster.

My palms scrape the stone. My knees weaken. His hot, hard chest presses against my back as he leans over me.

"You'll stay upright." His rough words brush against my ear. I moan.

My head drops back, and he nips my jaw.

"You'll keep yourself up while I make you come, or you won't come at all."

His words should make me angry. They should douse the flames of my desire. Instead, I get wetter. His words make every muscle in my body tense as he brings me closer to the edge. As I forget who he is, where I am, and everything that should matter.

I explode all over his hand, just like he said I would.

And I will hate him for it later, but right now…

Right now, I see stars. My body writhes with pleasure as I gasp for air.

Kane pulls his fingers out of me, and I'm ashamed of the whimper I let escape—but at least he sounds just as affected. His strong arm loops around

my middle, dragging me back until I feel him—all of him—pressed up against my backside.

We groan at the contact.

He leans down, and I feel the heat of his chest at my back; the skin contact is delicious, making me dizzy with the need for more. Still on all fours, I lift myself to close the distance still between us. The arm around me tightens, holding me to him.

“And now I’ll know what you feel like when you come on my cock,” he says roughly.

My eyes close at his vulgar words; the words rumbling on my back. The words breathed hot at my ear.

He straightens.

And thrusts into me.

I gasp and moan. I thought his fingers were good.

Nothing compares to the feeling of his thick length sliding into me, slick with my heat and hot with his want.

He groans, fingers tightening on my hips. The sounds of our lust and hatred echo around us, mixing with the sounds of Kane sheathing himself in me.

“Not…that good.” I push back against him, meeting each of his thrusts.

He slaps my ass and grips my hips tighter. My eyes squeeze shut as I pant. The pain is absolutely divine.

“No?” he asks.

I scramble to hold on to any sanity I might have left when Kane moves slightly. He barely shifts, but the change in angle takes my breath away.

Pleasure rolls through me in waves. Each thrust sends me closer to the edge once more.

It’s all I can do to stay upright as he pounds into me, hammering all sense out of me until I can’t think of why I ever argued with him at all. I gasp for breath. Fight the moans.

I clench around him. He groans with approval.

“Barely turned on,” I gasp, fingers pressed against the stone floor. I turn to look at him and am rewarded by his lust-glazed golden eyes watching at me as if there’s no one he hates more—and no one else he wants. My legs quiver. He smirks and slams harder into me.

The pain and pleasure make stars explode in my eyes, so I close them and let my head drop as he takes me over and over.

“Skies, you’re wet for someone who’s not turned on.” He grabs a fistful of my hair and yanks my head back, exposing my neck and forcing me to look up at him. I whimper and moan, gasping at how good he feels.

“Open your eyes.” He pulls my hair harder.

I open them.

His mouth is partially open, revealing elongated fangs. The sight of them should remind me of who he is. What he does.

I get wetter.

He grins.

“You like that?” Kane twists his hips and thrusts even deeper into me.

I think I respond. Maybe I just tighten around him. Delicious pain prickles at my scalp, and I pull against his fist just to pretend I don’t want it.

Kane leans down, bringing his head to mine. He drags his nose down the side of my face, along my jaw, and inhales deeply at the crook of my neck.

“N-no,” I croak.

He hums. The vibration against my sensitive skin makes me moan again, and I tighten my grasp on him even as he slides in and out of me.

“Fine,” he growls. His breath on my ear almost makes me regret the word, but he straightens, yanks my hair harder, and uses his grip to hold me in place as he thrusts into me faster. Deeper. With every bit of his passion and hatred for me.

I moan, barely keeping myself from sobbing. From begging for more.

“Fuuuck.” He drags the word out as he releases my hair. Slows his thrusting.

A strangled protest escapes my mouth.

Kane tries to flip me, but I resist.

“Don’t want…to see you,” I mumble, my eyes rolling back at the frustrating—yet delicious—slow pace. I feel everything. All of him. I feel every inch of his lust and his hatred and his frustration for me as he slides out until only his tip is at my entrance.

I feel the heat of his anger and his need as he slams himself into the farthest depths of my own desire, sheathing himself entirely.

We both groan.

He recovers first.

“You don’t want to look at me?” He pants, his hands grabbing my waist and lifting me slightly.

“No,” I reply roughly, letting him support my weight as I push back to feel more of him.

“That’s fine too.” He tightens his grip and drags me to him as he thrusts into me. We crash and collide into each other, over and over, and I ride the waves of pleasure as he pounds me relentlessly, slamming into me harder with each word he groans.

“You can look at the ground for all I care,” he growls through gritted teeth. “You can close your eyes and pretend it’s someone else fucking you until you see stars. You can imagine it’s not me pounding into you so deep, making you so wet when you’re on your hands and knees.”

His words are rough and vulgar and hateful.

And the more he speaks, the closer I get.

“You can hate me as much as I hate you.” He reaches around and palms my breast, fingers rolling my nipple.

I moan and grind against him shamelessly.

“You can wish you’d never met me as much as I wish I’d never met you.” His hand drags down my front to stop at the sensitive spot between my legs. He spreads his fingers and presses them flat against my soaked entrance, continuing to thrust into me as he pulls his fingers up my slit, dragging my hot desire with them.

Every muscle in my body stiffens, pleasure coiling through me as I tighten around him.

“But I’ll still know how you feel pulsing around me.” His wet fingers find my bundle of nerves.

I gasp when he pinches me.

“I’ll still know what you feel like…”

Kane thrusts harder, faster, slamming deeper into me over and over. His fingers stay between my thighs, pressing and pinching and soothing that aching, throbbing spot that makes me see stars.

It’s too much. It’s all too much.

I tighten around him.

I can barely breathe.

I can’t remember who I am. Who he is. Where we are.

All I can think of is his hot, thick need driving into me over and over. His fingers working between my legs. The heady need building. Building. Building.

“…When you come all over my dick.”

I scream for the skies as everything releases all at once.

He moans, loud and deep, as his movements turn jerky and uneven. As he pounds into me, frenzied and feral, drawing my pleasure out. I squeeze my eyes shut and see nothing but the stars and the lust in his gaze.

He roars as he spills into me, his own release chasing mine as I arch toward him, soaking up every moment of euphoria like I've never felt.

Not that I'd tell him as much.

He drops around me, his hands on the stone next to mine, caging me in.

We both pant, my back occasionally lifting to touch his chest when our breaths fall out of sync.

"Damn you," he growls between breaths.

"Likewise," I breathe. Then I clench.

He groans, dropping his forehead onto the back of my shoulder.

My heart hammers in my chest even when I finally return to myself and consider what just happened.

Me…and the King's Justice.

"Listen—"

"We're going to pretend like that didn't happen, right?" I interrupt. Whatever he has to say, I'm certain I don't want to hear it.

Another hot breath brushes against my back as he chuckles.

"Of course, Crimson." His gravelly voice rumbles, sending shivers down my back.

When he pulls out of me, after all that's happened, I'm still embarrassed to moan. At least he has the decency to groan with me.

"It's Scarlet," I snap. But there's no bite in my tone.

"Right. Sorry, Coral."

My eyes rise to the ceiling as I roll onto my back, relishing the cool comfort of the stone beneath my hot skin.

I can't help but notice that Kane, still on his knees as he stares down at me, is flushed as well.

"Oh!" I gasp and sit upright as I cross my arms over my chest, suddenly remembering *why* he's staring. Curse the skies for being so slow-minded.

A dark eyebrow rises along with one side of his lips.

I glare.

He shakes his head then points at one of the misty corners of the chamber. "Standing showers are over there."

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

Once I've finally cleaned off all—most—traces of the giant, dragon-shifter-sized mistake from my skin, I stride back to the hot pool, not quite ready to give up the relaxing heat just yet.

Unfortunately, Kane seems to share my sentiment as he pads barefoot and naked next to me, giving me an amused glance as he slips into the hot water.

"Turn around," I demand, clutching the towel wrapped tightly around my body.

"It's not as if I did not *just* see you." He drops an elbow on the stone floor, propping his head up against his hand.

My face flushes as I crouch, and I smack my hand against the water, splashing him. "Turn. Around."

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head, making sure I see his wide grin while turning slowly on the submerged bench until he faces the waterfall that refills the pool on the other end.

I huff and drop the towel, slipping quickly into the water just in case he decides to sneak a peek.

"You done, Vermillion?"

"Fine," I say—though, I stay crouched in the water as I walk around the edge of the pool to another bench, because I can't sit in the same spot where…the thing *that didn't happen* happened.

I close my eyes and press my neck against the cool stone, dropping my head to rest on the ground, thinking about what might be for dinner tonight.

Thinking about what kind of clothes the others got for me.

Thinking about what it will feel like to sleep on the lumpy bedroll.

Thinking about anything but the massive mistake I just made.

The mistake still throbbing between my legs.

“So. What were we talking about?” Kane’s deep voice rumbles through my frantic thoughts, and I sigh.

Rolling my head without turning it, I look at him. He has both arms spread out against the edge of the pool, hands just dipping into the water. The laziest, most obnoxious smirk sits wide on his face, and that scar on his eyebrow stretches with his quirked brow.

“What were—”

“You down here?” Maverik’s voice rings in the chamber from behind the partition, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

Kane glares in the direction where his cousin continues calling for him.

When the wolf shifter appears around the partition, he tilts his head, bright hair a stark contrast in the darkness. “What are you doing in the men’s pool, Scarlet?”

“The men’s pool?” I glance at Kane. “You didn’t mention it’s the men’s pool.”

Maverik grins. “That’s probably because he’s—”

“What do you want?” Kane growls. He turns fully, and in one smooth motion, pushes himself up and out of the water.

Maverik grimaces and lifts a hand. “Skies, no one wants to see that. Put something on, will you?” He sidesteps toward the benches with a hand covering his eyes and grabs a towel, throwing it at Kane, who catches it with one hand.

“That’s my towel!” I start rising from the water, but Kane whips around and fixes me with a dark glare and a raised brow. I drop back into the pool and cross my arms. His shoulders relax. “But what will I use?”

“You can use it once I’m done with it.” Kane—the King’s Justice, the most ruthless shifter in the kingdom—winks at me.

I bristle at his back as his cousin gets his attention.

“Or you can use one of these spares.” Maverik tosses another towel.

“How am I going to—” I’m interrupted when Kane snatches it out of the air, too. He tucks it under one arm while tying the first to his waist.

To my surprise, he strides to me and holds the towel up, letting the other end drop so I rise and wrap it around myself without exposing anything to the grinning wolf shifter.

“What are you doing here?” I grumble, turning to face Maverik as I secure the corner of my towel.

“Food’s here.” He and Kane answer together. Kane grabs a third towel and dries his hair with one hand, tossing me the robe with his other.

“I didn’t realize there was a men’s pool and a women’s pool,” I mumble, wrapping the robe around myself; its plush fabric distracts me from my embarrassment.

“There were signs.” Maverik chuckles, heading toward the stairs.

“I’d hardly call those wooden plaques as such, but that’s my mistake for expecting clear directions and wording from signs.” I successfully remove the sodden towel from beneath the robe and retie the knot. Kane takes it from me and adds it to the pile on the ground where he’d thrown his.

He glares at me. I glare back, tugging the tops of my robe closer together.

I reach for my old clothes, but he throws out an arm and stops me. It feels like a waste to discard them, but as I glance at the torn and blood-stained garments, I admit defeat.

“Well, you might have encountered strangers at the women’s pool, and it’s not as if anyone would have dared enter the men’s side. It probably worked out for the better this way.” Maverik snickers as he ascends the stairs, oblivious to the hateful staring match between me and his cousin. “As long as you don’t mind a crotchety dragon sniffing around you.”

I huff. “I do mind quite a bit. I think I would have preferred strangers.”

“It’s not as if I bit you,” Kane snaps.

“But you did!” I flush. How could I have been so stupid? With *him*?

Maverik stops mid-step, and I would have collided with his back had it not been for Kane grabbing me by the back of my robe.

“Not hard enough to draw blood,” Kane drawls.

I yank my robe out of his grip and pull it even tighter around myself. “Let’s keep it that way. I like to keep my blood inside my body, thank you very much.”

The wolf shifter doesn’t turn, but his shoulders shake silently in the barely lit stairwell.

I take a seat at the small table in the corner of the room, dressed in my new clothes courtesy of Mariette and the wolves. Neither the clothes nor the meal—hot soup, fresh bread, spiced meat, cheese, and fruits—are extravagant by any means, but they're all incredible compared to what I'm used to.

Someone brought extra chairs to the room while Kane and I were at the hot pool, so we all crowd around the table as we fill our plates, though Mariette and I are the only ones sitting.

She and I have both been outfitted in dark clothing, and though it's nowhere near as protective as the men's armour, it's better than the rags in which we'd left the castle. Plus, with the extra layers, the vest fits much better. Though, I immediately took it off after having checked; we'll wash everything as needed after dinner, and I will not be soiling my new clothes nor my newly cleaned self by wearing it before then.

I lean back, letting Greyson reach for the cheese.

Maverik slurps from his soup, and I make eye contact with Mariette.

She lifts an eyebrow as she glances from me to the men.

"So…" I start, breaking my hunk of bread into smaller pieces and dipping one into my steaming bowl.

Two pairs of silver eyes and one set of gold turn to me as Mariette quietly pushes her chair closer to the wall.

Coward. She's the one who spent time getting dinner and buying clothes with two of the Three—if anyone's to ask questions, she should have been the tribute.

I clear my throat. "I'm told there are some changes about the assignment regarding our freedom?"

I'd meant for it to be a statement, but it comes out like a question. Both wolves slide their eyes to Kane, who shrugs.

"Some things were said." He takes a bite from a meat skewer. "Ask your question, Cinnabar."

I snort. "Creative."

He chews slowly and without breaking eye contact. When he swallows, he says, "I can be more creative. Ask your question."

Mariette nods, her knuckles white around her fork.

"What exactly is the assignment we're meant to help—and survive—in order to earn our pardons?" I look each of the Three in the eye. "I know I'm the one who insisted on coming, but it doesn't make sense and it isn't fair to

have no idea where we're headed or even what we'll be participating in. At the very least, we should know how we're working toward our goal, especially when it seems related to silence stones and Rebels."

Maverik lowers his bowl, and Greyson looks from one cousin to the other. Kane has another one of those frustratingly silent conversations with them.

I grab another piece of bread and tear it just to keep my hands from trembling. My words were clear and my voice was strong, but there's no guarantee they'll agree. Despite their laughter and their willingness to clothe and feed us, Mariette and I are still their prisoners. They don't have to reason with us. They don't have to help us.

"We're here now," Maverik says, shrugging and lifting his second bowl, spearing a piece of meat from within it. "What harm could it do?"

Greyson sighs warily, but he also nods. "You're right." He looks from me to Maverik. "You both are."

"So you'll tell us?" Mariette asks, leaning forward in her seat. Her plate looks untouched.

"There's something you need to understand first, though." Greyson rubs the back of his neck. "You've seen Kane…in action."

Mariette and I glance at each other. She places her utensil down and sets her hands in her lap. I tear another piece from my bread and internally wince when it reminds me of the King's Justice tearing into people and drinking their blood. I put the bread on my plate and pick up a fork, instead. The panther shifter hasn't witnessed the drinking, but after having watched his dragon rip apart and eat his victims, it's not a far leap to assume the rumours of his thirst for blood are also true.

"And as you know, blood quenches his dragon's frenzy. Keeps him—the person—sane and in control," Greyson continues, ignoring Kane's scoff. "That's why we only take the worst of the worst criminals with us."

Silver-grey eyes stare at me as if willing me to understand without having to say the next words.

But I think I need to hear them.

A moment of silence passes, broken only by Maverik's curse. We all turn to him, and he looks up with a crooked grin. "Sorry. Dropped my bread."

Kane sighs and pulls out a chair, dropping heavily into the seat. "What my wolfish cousin is so delicately trying to avoid saying is that I eat them."

Mariette chokes.

She hits her chest, coughing. I reach over and slap her back, my mind still whirring and trying to process the words.

“You…eat them?” I finally ask.

All three nod solemnly.

“You have to remember the type of assignments we go on. They’re not easy. There’s a reason we’re the ones who receive them.” Maverik wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, setting his bowl down. The light of amusement is gone from his eyes. “We’re sent to dispatch the worst of the worst. So we bring with us the worst of the worst.” A sardonic smile creeps over his face as he lifts a shoulder. “They’re all terrible, but they might as well be good for one thing, right?”

I use my fork to push a piece of meat off my skewer just for something to do with my hands. “And what about us?”

Kane and Greyson both drag a hand through their hair, but Maverik’s back to his cheerful self as he chews.

“That’s why you needed to know what’s normal for us,” Greyson says. “So you understand why this is different.”

“So you’re saying we’re not here as fodder for Kane’s crazy dragon?” I bite my bottom lip as I consider this new information. No wonder no one has ever returned from going out with the King’s Three.

Kane bristles, but I’m stunned enough to wave him off. We all ignore Maverik’s chortle.

“That’s right,” Greyson says.

“I do hope that’s a relief to you.” Kane’s smile shows more teeth than necessary.

“If our reason for being here isn’t to be eaten, then why are we here?” Mariette asks, lifting her chin.

“You can thank your friend for that.” Greyson nods at me. “When she revealed her abilities, it gave us an idea.”

I narrow my eyes even as anticipation builds in my gut. Mariette tilts her head, wrapping her hands around her cup.

Maverik places his bowl by the others and stretches, catching his cup before it falls off the table’s edge. “We always have a few things going on for Uncle.” He waves a hand. “Lately, most of our assignments pertain to the Rebels, though we’re always on the lookout for reclaiming stolen silence stones. Thankfully, it’s less of a chore when Rebels are the ones

stealing stones, and squashing their camps generally results in reclaiming them."

Greyson adds, "Unfortunately for us all, we've noticed the appearance of some new magical inventions as of late. One of which is what you experienced."

"The incendiary," Mariette says.

The wolf shifter nods. "It's one of many we've recently encountered. We've learned to deal with most of them, but there's one we have yet to figure out. We think it has to do with the silence stones they're stealing, because this particular type of magic creates what we've been calling a silence dome."

Mariette's brows pull together. "A silence dome?"

"What does it do?" I ask.

Greyson tilts his head one way then the other. "It seems to do two things. The first is protecting whatever it contains, keeping shifters—even us—out. We haven't found a way to break through."

"Whatever is inside those domes has to be important." Maverik shakes his head, clicking his tongue as he takes a seat across from me. "But we don't know what it is. We've had to leave what I'm sure is a lot of stuff behind because we couldn't get in. And the worst part? When Uncle sends retrievers later, the domes are gone—along with whatever they were protecting."

"Which means Rebels not only have a way of setting up the magic, but they can also remove it," I say slowly. I still don't understand my role in this, and I'm almost scared to ask my next question. "What's the second thing the domes can do?"

"They trap us and keep us in place," Kane answers flatly, staring vacantly at the dinner spread. "Once a dome is erected, there's no way in or out. The first time we came across this type of magic, Maverik and I were chasing five or six Rebels. They lured us in one direction and waited until we stood side by side before casting the dome. We didn't even know it at first. We couldn't see it—a wall of translucent magic—until after we'd been trapped."

"Until we tried to leave." Maverik sighs deeply, shaking his head. "Skies, that was a close one. If Greyson had been with us, we might not have made it out."

“Mav was silenced. My dragon was almost entirely silenced. All we could do from within the dome was defend ourselves.” Kane’s eyes are distant as he slips into a memory only he and his cousins share. “Our weapons could pass through, but then we couldn’t retrieve them.”

My mouth dries; I wet my lips before speaking. “How did you escape?”

“…I don’t know,” replies Kane. “Greyson slaughtered each and every Rebel. Not a single one escaped—Mav’s nose confirmed it—but it wasn’t until hours later that the dome finally dissipated. To this day, we have no idea what finally ended it.”

“Did they use an artifact to cast the magic?” I ask, thinking of the king’s obsession with magical artifacts. “An ancient artifact, maybe?”

Maverik nods, reaching for another skewer. “They were holding things like scepters and such, and they did use them when raising the dome.”

“That’s the strange part.” Greyson chews slowly. “They used artifacts to cast the magic, but the magic lingered even after the artifacts were destroyed. Along with their casters.”

Mariette stares at her food, her complexion a sickly shade of green. I don’t blame her. Artifacts that give its user the ability to keep people in, as much as it can keep them out—without knowledge of how it works or how to stop it—is terrifying.

“Why hasn’t the king told everyone about this?” I lift a hand to my throat, still working to wrap my mind around the gravity of the situation. “Shouldn’t—shouldn’t he warn everyone? That there are ways Rebels can silence without the use of stones?”

“It’s not prominent enough to cause widespread panic.” Kane waves a hand. “We’re encountering them more often, but only at Rebel bases. They’re not even at camps. Unless someone goes looking for trouble the way we do, it’s unlikely a regular person will ever stumble upon it.”

“How big is it?” I ask quietly. “How big can the dome get?”

Greyson takes a deep breath as he thinks, tilting his head back and forth. “We’ve seen them as small as protecting a bush to as large as surrounding a cabin.”

“Nothing seems to form its perimeters, either.” Maverik groans. “At least the walls of the domes are visible.”

“And what does Scarlet have to do with this heinous thing?” Mariette asks quietly but firmly. “What can she possibly do to help?”

She glances discreetly at my bare wrists, and I am inclined to agree; I'm shiftless. Compared to what we just heard, I can't imagine how I might be of use.

"Well…" Maverik scratches his chin, looking as if he's buying time to think of the right words.

Greyson shifts his weight from one foot as he puts his bowl onto the table. "That's to say…"

"You're immune to shifter magic, so we think you might be immune to the dome as well, considering it silences shifters," Kane declares.

"You think? What if she's not? What if you're wrong?" Mariette demands, standing so fast, the chair's legs scrape noisily on the ground. "Are you talking about sending her out on her own?"

"Of course not," Greyson answers calmly, joining his cousins in taking a seat between them. "We'll be in the vicinity, and we'll be able to act before anything happens."

"Don't worry," Kane says with a dark look. "You'll only come in once the area's been secured. No one will be around to hurt you."

I suppress a shiver. He means no one would be *left* to hurt me.

"It's not right." The panther shifter shakes her head. "You can't know what it might do to her—you can't know that she'll be safe."

"What's not right is what these Rebels are doing." Kane's eyes flash with anger, and it's the first time I've seen it directed at something other than my existence. "They're harming innocent people, hurting their families and livelihoods, and not to mention turning them into these twisted, red-eyed monsters who murder their own kind and kill with reckless abandon."

Mariette inhales sharply, likely swallowing a retort in the same vein as the questions invading my mind.

Like your cousins? Like you?

I reach for her wrist and tug her back down instead. Giving my friend a smile that doesn't reach my eyes, I say, "If it'll help the innocent and earn our freedom, I can do it. I will do it."

Mariette looks pained as she settles into her seat. "At least tell us how many times she'll have to try this. How many times she'll have to risk her life."

"It's hard to say," Greyson answers with a furrowed brow. "The king's agreement has always been the retrieval of one thousand stones for a pardon and ten years of freedom from apprehension."

“One…one thousand?” I blink. I must have heard incorrectly. “That’s so many.”

“You didn’t know?” Maverik’s eyebrow rises. “What did you think we were keeping from you? The stone retrieval?”

“I didn’t have all the details when I made the decision,” I admit. “It’s stupid, I know. I was just…”

I pause, unsure—or unwilling—to admit how desperate I’d been. How the thought of my life once again being controlled by someone else had blinded me with such terror, I’d acted before thinking anything through.

“You’re here now,” Maverik says more gently than I’d expected. “Might as well make the best of it. We’ll have one thousand collected before you know it.”

He laughs, and though it earns him a glare from Mariette, my heart is warmed by a rush of affection for the wolf. Whether he knows it, he pulled me from my thoughts and saved me from facing my insecurities and explaining myself before I’m ready.

I glance at Kane’s neck, where several stones are embedded in the collar hidden beneath his shirt. Then I look at Mariette’s wrists, where one gem sits dully on each cuff.

Maverik leans over and stabs his fork into a piece of cheese. “It’s truly not that many. Like I said, we are only sent on the most dangerous assignments. The bases we raid will have more than mere handfuls of stones, and the ones that do have silence domes will be hiding something good.” He winks.

“Besides,” Kane drawls, dragging his chair closer to mine and bending so our faces are level. My back stiffens. I force the rising warmth to fall, pressing my legs together and willing myself to forget what *didn’t happen* and focus on the matter at hand. “It’s in my best interest to keep you alive, unmarred, and to get you out of my sight as soon as possible.”

He blinks slowly. I bite the inside of my cheek.

The way he purrs makes me think his intentions are the exact opposite of his words.

“And what about the red-eyed Rebels?” I ask, proud my voice stays steady as I turn from him to look at Greyson. “You said you lost them because of us—even though it wasn’t our fault. How do they play into this?”

“I imagine we’ll encounter them again at some point. It’s just how it is, sometimes.” Greyson shrugs, piling more food onto his now empty plate. “Don’t listen to Kane if he tells you otherwise.”

For a dragon shifter, Kane grins wolfishly as he takes the plate from his cousin, seeming completely unaware—or simply unaffected—of his leg pressing against mine. “It’s not your problem to worry about, Carmine. Just focus on not dying, won’t you?”

I shift in my seat, pulling my knee from his and swallowing the rising mix of feelings I don’t dare explore as Greyson grumbles and stabs a piece of meat from Kane’s plate—the one he’d filled for himself. Maverik barks a laugh and steals more food from Kane while Kane threatens them with a knife in one hand and defends his plate with a fork in the other. From their reputation, I never would have thought the King’s Three would be like… this. Casual, comfortable, and even arrogant. It’s almost too easy to forget they’re the deadliest warriors of Selerune. They’ve let me get away with my smart remarks so far, but I may not be safe for long if I keep testing my luck.

Greyson reaches behind him and drags another small table with one hand, the other still holding a bowl out of reach from Kane. Maverik turns to give him room, and Greyson sets his food down before walking to the bed for his bag. When he returns, he unrolls a scroll on the second table, smoothing the page with his hand and taking the bowl from Maverik to place at one end, flattening it.

“What’s this?” I ask, taking the opportunity to peel myself farther from Kane as I peer around his massive shoulder. Behind me, Mariette presses herself closer to look as well, the ends of her short hair, sticking up in their tails, tickle the side of my face, but the lines on the map make me pause.

“Since it’s been unanimously decided you two should be better informed of what to expect”—he lifts a brow at both cousins, daring them to interrupt—“this a map of Selerune. Well, part of it.” Greyson points at one section. “That’s The Wilds. Don’t go there.”

Mariette and I scoff at the same time. Maverik laughs.

“This is approximately where we are, and this is where we’re headed.”

My brows pull together as I stare at the dark patches and strange scribbles. I’ve not had reason to see many maps, and this doesn’t look like any map I *have* seen. “But there aren’t any towns or cities drawn on here. How can you tell?”

“Oh, don’t get him started,” Maverik says, leaning and placing an arm on Greyson’s shoulder with a wide grin. “He’ll talk your ear off and you won’t sleep all night.”

Greyson shrugs away from his cousin. “It’s a mapping system we devised ourselves. After a few…incidents over the years, we realized we’re not always great with keeping track of certain things. Once something like a map gets into the wrong hands—well, let’s just say this is our own language.”

“He says we, but he means *he*,” Kane points out. He invades my space, and I feel the urge to switch seats with Mariette.

“Well, it was a group effort.” Greyson clears his throat. “As I was saying. We’re here right now, but we’ll be here by sunset tomorrow, which will be perfect timing.”

Questions swirl in my head, but I can’t decide which to ask first.

“Why are you showing us, then?” I blurt. Mariette stiffens at my side, as if she’s just realized the same thing—or maybe she already knew, but was hoping I wouldn’t say it out loud. “Aren’t you worried we’ll expose your secret language?”

Maverik laughs. Kane stands, turns his seat, and crosses his arms over the back of the chair as he sits.

“I’m not worried,” Greyson says with a chuckle. “Even if you were to take off with this specific map and showed someone the location of Wynbrook, everything else here would mean nothing to them unless they knew exactly what to look for. And what is a map but an item that shows you how to get where you want to go?” He shakes his head. “No, this is useful only to our eyes.”

I’m not sure whether to feel comforted or insulted, but it’s best to let sleeping wolves lie, so I simply nod along. “In that case, what do these markings represent?”

“These are locations of recent suspected Rebel activity and camps.” Maverik reaches down to point at several repeated marks spread all over the map. “These are reports that might lead to a base.”

I can’t hold back the gasp; if each of these markings indicate stolen supplies of silence stones, there’s a chance Mariette and I could be free sooner than we’d even hoped for.

“And these are only the ones you’re told to…investigate?” I ask.

“This time around.” Maverik smiles, looking dangerous even as he pops a piece of cheese into his mouth.

“Yes, there are more than most think.” Kane drops his chin over his crossed arms, narrowing his eyes at the map he must have seen many times already. “Unfortunately, Rebel bases don’t necessarily give themselves away, so we follow as many relevant leads as we can.”

“What exactly do they want?” I drop my hands into my lap and wring my fingers, all inappropriate thoughts forgotten.

Even Mariette looks at me with disbelief, so I quickly shake my head.

“No, I mean—I know they want to end King Waylon’s reign.” Everyone knows the Rebels are the biggest thorn at the king’s side. For as long as I can remember, he’s been recruiting people—shifters and shiftless alike—to fight in his war against the Rebels. But I’ve never paid much attention to the specifics, because I’ve never had need to. In the deepest, darkest corners of my mind though, in my most difficult times, I considered seeking them out just to feel like I belong somewhere and can do something. Not that I’d have even known exactly what I’d have joined. “But what are they doing, specifically?”

Maverik drags a hand over his tied hair. “You sure live sheltered lives, don’t you?”

“Well, when you guys keep things like silence domes from everyone, can you blame us?” Mariette scoffs. I smile.

“It’s just that Grengrove—where I’m from—we’re so small, the running joke is that we were nearly renamed to Grenshire,” I say. In terms of importance to the kingdom, Grengrove is barely one step above a village, and villages receive even less news; what eventually does arrive tends to take so long, much is already out of date. “We were fortunate to have never experienced a Rebel attack. At least not in my lifetime.”

I don’t understand the long look Greyson gives me, his silver-grey eyes staying on me even when Kane speaks.

“We don’t know their plan or even their next step. Not specifically. For a while, they stole magical artifacts. Lately, they’ve been attacking silence stone excavation sites and stealing from those. Red-Eye sightings have also increased with the appearance of their inventions like the incendiary, and Red-Eyes are getting as bold as attacking people on the roads.” Kane shakes his head, working his jaw. All thoughts of food have been forgotten as Mariette and I absorb the information. “Uncle suspects they’re related.

Perhaps Rebels were misusing artifacts to bolster their power and ranks, and now the Red-Eyes are getting out of control."

"Hence the need for stones to silence them." I stare at the map, but my mind's eye replays the manic looks of the shifters we've seen.

Kane nods. "Exactly. And with the shortage of stones, we can't let them get the upper hand. In any way."

I bite my lip. "Those attacks—that's what happened to us that night."

The night I first saw Kane's golden eyes so full of hatred; I hadn't understood at the time, but he must have been wrangling his dragon and resisting my blood even then.

"It wasn't our first encounter with Red-Eyes, but it was the first time we confirmed they're behind the deaths we've been looking into. I don't know if you remember, but they tend to leave a certain…mark." Greyson drags a hand through his hair with a heavy sigh. "That's why we were so disappointed when we lost that potential lead."

A much kinder way of putting it compared to how Kane had reacted.

"But on the bright side," Maverik says, lifting a finger. "Hunting Rebels and retrieving stolen stones is how we learned about them in the first place, so we're on the right track."

Greyson nods. "It is what we do best, after all."

"And I'm sure you two are extra motivated to earn your pardons." Maverik grins. "Which means we'll put a stop to this in no time."

True to Greyson's prediction, we ride all day and arrive at the intended destination just before sunset. Unfortunately, all we find is the remnants of a wagon with spoiled food and other rotten things I don't want to focus on.

Maverik dismounts and crouches near the debris.

"Don't do that," Kane groans. The rumble travels all the way to my front, but because we're stopped, I take the opportunity to drop my arms from his midsection. I shake out my wrists, pleased I'd successfully convinced him to leave the bindings off after profusely promising to stay on the horse.

"It helps me smell better," the wolf counters.

“Then at least shift so you look the part,” Kane mutters.

Maverik gives his cousin a crooked smile in response as thin strands of magic whirl around his head, the silver blending with his long hair.

Mariette, still on Maverik’s horse, tilts her head. As a shifter herself, I’m sure she’s interested in the abilities the Three can command, especially when we might get to witness the rare skill of scenting.

“Well?” Greyson asks, brow quirked.

Maverik shushes his fair-haired cousin. “I’m working on it.”

More threads of magic wrap around Maverik until he’s entirely hidden behind a rushing wall of silver strands, twisting and turning until his silhouette drops onto all fours; two pointed ears pop up, and a long tail extends.

The massive grey-white wolf emerges, shaking his entire body of magic as he settles into his animal form. In the fading sunlight, Maverik’s coat is more dusty than white, and a quiet part of my mind finds amusement in Greyson’s wolf being pure white while Maverik’s fur is more grey.

I pause at the realization of having noticed details like this.

It’s for survival.

I have better chances of surviving the King’s Three if I don’t offend the wolves and mistake them for one another. That’s why I noticed their differences. Nothing more.

Familiar silver-grey eyes blink up at us before Maverik turns back to the debris on the ground, fur reflecting beautifully in the warm light.

I don’t think I will ever get used to seeing these wolves.

“He’s got nothing.” Kane leans to one side so I can have a better look. “He’s got nothing, right?”

I force down the blush at Kane’s unexpected attention—he’d ignored me most of the day, much to my relief—and study Maverik as he sniffs the area like a true, natural-born wolf.

“I’m not sure,” I respond.

Kane laughs but doesn’t block my view. Something must be wrong with me, because I enjoy the richness of his laughter; it sounds genuine and carefree—things I would never have thought to associate with the King’s Justice.

“She’s just being polite. She knows you’ve got nothing,” Kane says.

“Not true!” I hiss and hit him on the arm. He pretends to wince, but it’s my hand that stings. He’s still armoured from head to toe.

“Bah, she’s right.” Maverik straightens and stretches his arms over his head, surprising me with the speed of his shift even as the remaining sparkles of magic fall from his sides. “There’s the lingering scent of battle, but it’s been too long. Rain has washed it away, so all I can tell is someone —either survivors or attackers—went that way.”

The cousins nod in agreement.

“You’re not going to check, too?” Mariette tilts her head at Greyson.

“Hey!” Maverik stops in front of the panther shifter and looks up at her with indignation. “I ought to kick you off my horse.”

Mariette bites back a smile, but not fast enough that I can’t tell she’s trying to hide it as she shrugs nonchalantly. “I’m just thinking the King’s Three consists of three shifters. Three noses.”

“Unfortunately, Mav does have the best nose.” Greyson chuckles. “If he says that’s all, we won’t find more.”

I wait for Kane to protest, but he only sighs.

“Don’t ask them how we figured it out.” Maverik winks as he mounts.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

We ride slowly so Maverik can track the scent for as long as possible. Unfortunately, the gentle pace makes me far too aware of everywhere Kane and I are touching, and the silence makes everything worse.

"What?" Kane asks, keeping his voice quiet enough it's clear I'm the only one meant to hear.

"I didn't say anything."

"I can feel you vibrating with anxiety back there."

"I do not vibrate." If anything, he's the one who vibrates, what with all those low growls and deep grumbles.

"Spit it out."

I try to slip my hands from his stomach to press my palms against my face, but he grabs my arms and keeps me firmly in place.

I settle for dropping my forehead against his back.

"Was that a Red-Eye attack?" I finally ask, swallowing the memory of the wreckage.

"Yes."

"Whose wagon was that?" I croak. "Was it carrying silence stones for the crown?"

"No, it wasn't one of his."

The way Kane says *his* confuses me; that which belongs to King Waylon surely belongs to him and his cousins as well?

"It looked to have been a travelling trader. There was no royal insignia on it." His answer, though nonchalant, makes my skin prickle with unease. Even after having slept on what we'd learned the night before, hearing the

words out loud still sends dread washing over me, and I force myself to remember this is exactly what I'd wanted. This is what I'd bargained for.

"What did the reports say about this area, then? Why were you looking here?"

"Rebel activity."

I close my eyes and breathe deeply through my nose. It shouldn't be silly of me to hope Kane would divulge more information after last night's discussion, but I'm frustrated all the same. With him, with myself. With everything.

He chuckles. I stiffen.

"Not the kind we typically handle," he answers, the warmth in his deep voice wrapping around me. Why the sudden change in tone? Is he teasing me? "Usually, we stop bigger acts of resistance—things like violent attacks on towns—but because we've been following leads on Red-Eyes, even whispers of recruitment could be relevant."

"Oh." I bite my lip, thinking back to the number of markings on Greyson's map. Recruitment is not a small matter, but it makes sense for Dracori Knights to deal with it when the King's Three are powerful enough to stop a small army.

"That's not why we're here, though."

I can almost hear his smirk as I huff.

He's toying with me.

"So what is it, then?"

"No attacks on people at the time, but stone scouts reported seeing strange markings in the area. Gouges in the soil, trees, and even boulders. Sounds a little too familiar to how Red-Eyes kill."

"Signs of fighting?" I ask quietly. If their suspicions are correct, we're already too late. My shoulders curl inward until I remember whose body I'm curling toward.

"None of the stone scouts noted indications of violence. They simply couldn't make heads nor tails of the markings. Until today, we weren't sure what we were looking for."

"Territorial, maybe?" I ask. Some shifters are known to align more with their animal side.

"Maybe." He releases my wrists, and I finally shift into a more comfortable position; my legs are numbing.

“What are stone scouts, anyway?” I ask, breathing deeply and letting the cooling air of the darkening night settle in my lungs. “I’ve never heard of the term.”

Kane pulls the reins to follow Maverik as his cousin picks up speed. “Shifters sent out by the crown to mark locations where silence stones may be found. Once they report back, teams travel to set up the site and begin excavation.”

“They must cover a lot of ground, then.”

“Yes. Dangerous, too. It’s not the most coveted role.”

Would my life truly have been better, or easier, if I’d been born a shifter? If I’d found work scouting for silence stones? Would I have wished for something else?

Kane’s hand wraps around my smaller one, his fingers absentmindedly twining with mine. If the silence makes him uncomfortable, he doesn’t make it known.

“As for the excavation teams, they also go through a long and dangerous process to dig the stones out, which is why Rebels steal them instead of getting their own—and why we have to get them back.”

I hum my appreciation for the information. He continues playing with my hands, and I let him.

There’s so much about Selerune I don’t know. So much I’ve never considered, simply because I was so wrapped up in my own survival. Should I have spent more time thinking about things like Rebels and how silence stones are collected? Should I have learned more about the kingdom outside of my little town?

It’s not as if it would have helped with my payments to Spencer. It’s not as if it would have added food to my table or repaired the holes in my roof. But maybe knowing more and being more aware in general will help now, since my world has expanded from Grengrove, and the risks are much higher.

“Where we’re headed—this something I can help with?”

He stays quiet for so long, I would have thought he didn’t hear me except for his long fingers tightening around my wrists—because he can hold both in one hand—pinning me in place.

“There are a few ways.”

I swallow a groan at his cryptic answer. The long day of travelling has frayed my patience along with most of my self-preservation instincts when

it comes to Kane. “Do you ever make things easy?”

I ignore the way his chuckle ripples through me as his hand loosens on mine, thumb running over the sensitive skin on my wrist.

“Everyone agreed we’re to be better informed of what to expect.”

“Better informed, yes. But how will I ensure I stay interesting to you if I reveal all my secrets?”

“I don’t think intrigue is a problem,” I mutter.

“It depends on what we find.” He pauses. I slip a hand out of his grasp and slap his stomach—even knowing it’ll only hurt me—simply because I’m tired, uncomfortable, and aching all over.

With a deep, rich laugh that goes right to my core, he continues. “And it depends on what you’ll be able to do tonight.”

I stop breathing. All previous thoughts vanish like smoke, and I suddenly feel the need to press my legs together as new thoughts of what we might do flash in my mind. Where I might touch. Where my hands might go. What he might taste.

He lets out a rumble that sounds suspiciously like a groan. “Not like that, Auburn.”

My cheeks flush with warmth as I mutter, “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“So many lies, so little time to tease the truth from you.”

My pulse speeds, and the warmth in my face spreads to the rest of my body as I fight the images of what he might do to tease the truth from me. I exhale through my nose, trying to think of anything else.

“But no, Fire Opal. Not like that.”

A pearl of satisfaction forms when his chest rises and falls as he takes one deep breath after another. He’s not unaffected.

The thought both scares and excites me.

“When we stop for the night, we’ll start working on your abilities.”

“My…abilities.” The phrase feels strange on my lips. How many times had I wished I could say these exact words and refer to shifter magic? How many nights had I hoped to one day use these words and know they were true? Now that the King’s Justice is saying them to me, I don’t know if the skies have granted my wish or cursed me instead.

“Yes, remember those?” Kane mocks. “The cat thing? The immunity thing?”

His teasing snaps me out of my latest, rapidly descending spiral, and while I'm grateful for the sudden laughter, I won't be thanking him for it. I slap his abdomen again.

"I haven't quite forgotten. But it's not as if I can control it."

"We'll see about that."

"You can wash once you've figured this out." Kane barks at me, and an entirely different sort of heat ignites in my chest as anger flares. Maverik and Mariette sit on a log while Greyson cocks his head at me, waiting for my signal.

We've been at this for hours. The wolf shifters take turns confirming the level of shifter magic that affects me—none—and the amount of strength it takes inflict harm—always less than they think, to my detriment—and I still can't transform into a cat.

"I already told you I can't control it," I snap, wiping the back of my hand over my mouth. To make matters worse, Kane forces his blood down my throat every time I suffer even a single scratch. It heals my body, but shortens my patience. "You've seen what affects me and what doesn't. Why are we still doing this?"

"The old books did say venihira magic was tied to their emotions." Greyson tilts his head. "That first time you transformed was when you were scared of Kane's fire, right?"

Kane looks up at the sliver of moon hanging high in the dark sky.

The wolf shifter nods, glancing at Maverik. "Maybe something else will do the trick."

The orange of the campfire paints Maverik's long, tied hair gold as transpires between the cousins, but I don't notice at all because I'm still stuck on what Greyson said, the words needling at the back of my mind.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" I ask.

Greyson blinks. "Maybe Maverik's wolf will encourage you?"

"No, no." I shake my head. "The other thing. Why were you talking about…What did you call it? Venihira?"

"Oh." His light brows rise. "Ah, I'm sorry. Did I forget to mention?"

“Mention what?” My confusion mixes with trepidation as memories work to climb toward the surface. Mariette’s eyes settle on me, but I can’t shake the feeling I’ve forgotten something important.

“We suspect you’re a venihira.”

I blink.

All four shifters stare at me, waiting for a response I don’t know how to give. I run my fingers over the ridges at the bottom of my vest, my skin prickling with unease as an uncomfortable weight forms at the pit of my stomach. Where have I heard this before?

“She doesn’t know,” Maverik says, crossing his arms beside Mariette. She shifts in her seat on the log.

Greyson’s shoulders drop, but he shrugs. “It’s not common knowledge. I only found one book about it, and that book was barely a book at all. More like pages held together by crumbling string.” He turns to me. “I had suspected, but didn’t know for sure, so I did some research. It appears you might be part of an old race of people called the venihira. Does this mean anything to you at all?”

Mariette tenses as the Three study me. Had she been the one to mention it, or had it been Kieran and Wickham?

Greyson nods slowly. “Venihira were said to have been immune to shifter magic as well as being the creators of silence stone—likely from their special brand of immunity.”

The men don’t notice when Mariette inhales sharply. She doesn’t rise from her seat by the fire, but when I glance at her green eyes, the pieces finally fall together. She’d been trying to tell me about the venihira before we were attacked, and Wickham and Kieran had said something about the amulet, too. What had they called it? Venihira Ragana?

The aches and pain of the day’s travels dissipate as all the breath leaves my lungs.

“Even in those pages I read, information about the venihira were scarce. Mere footnotes, really. But they did imply strong ties to wild cats in the venihira’s ability to transform into them as ways of hiding from detection and protection against shifters.”

“Why did they need protection?” I ask numbly. “What happened to them?”

The Three shrug. Mariette shakes her head.

“I don’t think anyone knows.” Greyson sighs. “It seems they were, at one point, common enough around the kingdom. Then something must have happened, because they’ve fallen off and disappeared completely. Yet somehow, silence stones persist.”

“Maybe they changed the face of the nature?” Maverik taps a finger to his chin.

“It’s possible. But like I said, emotions may be the key to your cat form.”

“Like you said?” I gawk at Greyson. “This is really big news that you just dropped on me.”

He flinches. “Sorry about that. We were preoccupied.” He looks at his cousins, adding, “Weren’t we?”

I let go of the frustration rising in my chest, but when a storm of uncertainty threatens to buckle my knees, I’m tempted to hide behind anger instead. It feels as though he’s ripped the ground from my feet. I don’t know how to process this new piece of information. “What does this mean for me, then?”

Maverik scratches his head, turning to Mariette and his cousins before shrugging. “I’m not sure.”

Dread swirls in my gut, whirling with my thoughts. Does this mean anything? Should it? Will everything be different now?

“It means whatever you want it to mean.” Kane’s gruff reply whips through the ringing in my ears.

I take a deep, gasping breath and turn to him. His golden eyes shine in the haze rapidly descending on my mind; my heartbeat doesn’t slow, but neither does it speed further.

“W-what?”

“Finding out you’re a venihira means whatever you want it to mean,” he repeats, voice even rougher. “What you are does not dictate who you are. What you can and want to do does not change just because you discover something new about yourself. Don’t be an idiot.”

His tone is unkind, but the words do something to me. They mean something to me—because they mean something to him, too.

Slowly, my fists stop trembling, and my fingers uncurl just enough to run my fingertips over the crescent-shaped grooves in my palms. I hold his fierce gaze as I level my breathing.

As much as I hate to admit it, he’s right. Finding out I might be a venihira doesn’t make me a shifter. It doesn’t change my past, nor does it free me from my bargain.

Maybe it just means I have more to learn about myself, and maybe it means I have a secret to keep close to my heart, especially if there’s a reason the venihira are all gone.

But I’m still me.

Even if my form is sometimes different.

I take a deep breath and exhale the unease. Venihira or not, immunity to shifter magic and the ability to change into a cat is what got me here—it’s what convinced the King’s Three to give us a chance at earning our pardons, and it’s motivated Kane to keep me alive. It’s what got me this far.

It protected me when I didn’t even know I needed it.

Warmth flickers in the centre of my chest; the heat grows, but it doesn’t scald me as it radiates and spreads outward, reaching for each of my limbs until the tips of my fingers and my toes all feel as though they’re glowing.

Lifting my hands to my face, I study the light shimmering over my skin. The sparkles spread and rise, but I don’t feel any pain. When I look up at the others, they’re wide-eyed and slack jawed—then my vision blurs.

The world spins. A wave of nausea hits me, and I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to keep hold of myself as colours blend and brighten and darken all at once.

Red flashes behind my closed eyes. Then orange.

Fire and ice charge through my veins, mixing and swirling as I gasp for air—but it doesn’t feel right. The air feels different. Breathing feels different.

Once the rush passes and I finally stop spinning, I take deeper breaths and open my eyes.

Everyone towers over me, looking down with their pale, unblinking faces.

I step forward and freeze.

My heart leaps into my chest with what I already knew, in the farthest parts of my mind, to be true.

Excitement flutters in my heart before dread slams it aside at the sight of the little black paws beneath me.

My breaths shorten as I become increasingly aware of every part of my strange body. The soil and debris touching my sensitive feet—*paws*. The

increased crisp of the air. The tail swishing behind me, reacting instantly to each of my movements without a thought.

"*Meow?*" I almost hit myself in the face for having forgotten—if I had had hands to do so—that I can't speak.

Mariette's mouth opens and closes without a sound. Maverik and Greyson exhale hard, the latter dragging a hand over his hair with a shake of his head. Kane's brow rises, one corner of his lips threatening to lift as his gold eyes study me from nose to tail.

Maverik bites his lip in a poor attempt to keep from laughing at Kane as Mariette clutches at his arm. Both are now standing, and my friend continues staring at me, her pallor as pale as the hair of the wolf beside her.

"So it's true," she whispers. I'm not sure she's aware of just how tightly she's gripping Maverik. "It's really true you can transform into a cat."

"Witnessing it is quite different from hearing about it, hm?" Greyson mutters.

Mariette blinks and clears her throat. "Yeah. She told me, but it wasn't…"

"Yeah," Maverik agrees.

"*Meow,*" I say, once again annoyed at this mouth for its inability to form words.

"I'm not sure that's ever going to get old." Greyson pulls at his fair hair, sounding breathless.

I take a seat on the ground, adjusting when something pokes the start of my tail. Without thinking, I rise and kick the twig with my back foot before settling down again, tucking all four paws together and curling my tail around them as I focus on my breathing.

One breath in.

One breath out.

I've taken the form of a cat, but I'm still me. I may not know how I changed nor how to change back, but on the inside, I am still me.

If I'm to help the King's Three, if I'm to survive whatever is thrown my way, I need to know what I can do and what I cannot do. It took a long time to learn the way my body—my human body—moves and how to best defend and attack against an opponent in The Cage, but I'd done it, and I'd succeeded. If I'm to survive this opportunity with the Three, especially if I can't control how or when I transform, I need to adapt to this body, too.

The first time this happened, I had panicked. That fear still simmers right beneath my skin, but a thread of intrigue now twines with it.

I don't focus on everyone's silence; last time, I'd changed back almost immediately, so I have to act fast and investigate now.

I lift my nose to smell the air.

I strain my ears to listen.

I tilt my head and blink.

As far as I can tell, my senses, unlike when shifters are in their animal forms, have not been heightened. Things feel different to my new body, but nothing stands out that I hadn't previously noticed as a human.

"You still in there?" Kane finally asks.

I turn to his voice only for my vision to meet the tops of his boots. When those boots stride toward me, my ears flatten and I scramble back.

"You're scaring her," Maverik says, stopping Kane with an arm thrown across his cousin's chest.

"Yeah." Mariette nods and swallows. "You must seem way bigger than usual. We probably all do."

Kane grumbles something I feel I would have been able to hear if I'd had the sharp hearing of a natural-born cat. He crouches.

I pull my head back at the sudden movement, but when he drops lower to the ground, his golden eyes contain only curiosity and…something like concern.

No, that can't be it. Despite what *didn't happen* between us, the King's Justice would not be concerned about me—except maybe if he's worried I can no longer help with his assignments in this form.

"You still in there?" His tone is much softer as he reaches toward me like I'm a frightened wild animal. I can't tell if I should be insulted or flattered.

All the same, I tilt my head and snarl at the hand outstretched between us.

He chuckles. My cat brain must be as defective as my human one, because the rich sound wraps around me like a warm blanket, tempting me to press my face against his palm. I don't even realize my eyes close, but by the time I open them, I've already taken two steps forward. I freeze and glare daggers at him, a hiss instinctively escaping my lips.

"Still there, I see." Kane smirks, retracting his arm and resting his elbow on his knee. "So?"

Maverik snorts from behind him.

I agree—I would have raised an eyebrow if I had one.

“Fascinating.” Greyson steps forward and drops to a crouch next to Kane.

In the corners of my eyes, Mariette finally returns to her senses and snatches her hand back from Maverik. He doesn’t say a word as they both shuffle over and lower to my level, as well.

“I do wonder how this works,” Greyson mutters.

“How do you change back?” Mariette asks.

“Should we see how much shifter magic affects her now?” Maverik lifts a hand, silver strands already swirling around his fingers.

Kane pushes his cousin off balance, and the wolf allows himself to fall with a laugh.

“*Meow,*” I reply—because what else can I say?—eyeing Maverik warily as he rights himself.

Mariette’s forehead creases with concern. “Are you okay in there?”

I nod.

After a beat of silence, she swallows.

“You…” Her eyes widen, eyebrows pulling together as her mouth opens slightly. “You’re so cute!”

I pull back from the sudden, unexpected squeal in her voice. She either notices my reaction or realizes how she’s responded, because she presses her hands to her cheeks, exhaling and mumbling apologies under her breath.

“Must be a cat thing,” Maverik says. I tamp down on a meow of agreement as Mariette’s large eyes remain on me, her hands twitching against her face like she’s itching to pet me.

“I am not a cat.” The offended look she gives the wolf shifter is only slightly undermined by her fingers still squishing her cheeks together. “I am a panther.”

Maverik shrugs. “Seems close enough to me.”

“There’s a difference.” Mariette huffs, crossing her arms over her knees as she peers at me again with soft affection that doesn’t quite fit her usual tough exterior.

“You do understand us, yes?” Greyson asks.

I nod again.

“Can you lift your left hand—I mean paw?” He raises his own as if I might need the guidance.

Kane scoffs.

I want to lift my right just to spite them, but I become acutely aware of how strange the situation is; four shifters crouched to the ground, surrounding me and watching my every movement. It feels like just yesterday when I was wishing I had an animal form, and now one of the King's Three is asking me to lift a *paw*.

My left paw rises. Mariette beams as if I were a pet she's proud of. Greyson nods.

"How is your control over your body?" he asks. "Most shifters experience disorientation when going through their first shift. Limbs don't feel right, balance is off. That sort of thing."

Greyson cranes his neck and peers over me, reaching toward my backside. His hand pauses in midair as his head dips, noticing my tail curled around me.

I rise to all fours and hiss when his hand hovers too close; he will not be touching any part of my furry body—not with the intent of examination written across his features as clear as day.

He turns his hand so the palm faces me. "All right, sorry about that."

"It does appear she not only retains her mind and her faculties, but also her personality," Kane murmurs, his golden eyes bright with amusement. Despite the darkness of the night, he looks lighter than I've ever seen him. Again, I find myself drawn in.

Again, I resist.

"What shall we test first, then?" Kane's question settles over me; his voice is gentle, but his words send shivers of fear down my spine and all the way to my tail.

"Isn't that what I asked?" Maverik complains.

"We should probably…"

"There isn't…"

Their conversation fades in my mind as I suddenly feel very small and far too vulnerable, surrounded by four significantly larger people—three of whom are the most powerful shifters of the kingdom.

I'm so different from them, and everyone I've ever loved has left me.

No one has stayed, no matter how nice they've been.

Mariette is kind, but she's here because I forced it.

Greyson is only interested in my strange abilities.

Maverik wants to know how my immunity will respond.

Kane…

The King’s Justice has his own agenda, too. Whether it’s how I can help him with his assignments or how he might get my blood, I would be a fool to think he truly cares for me.

That any of them truly care for me.

Because even if they do, everyone who’s ever cared has left me.

They always do.

Their conversation continues as my mind conjures image after image, each worse than the last. I don’t hear their words as they talk with one another, but my heart hears the muffles of Mariette telling them they don’t need me, Maverik asking how he should harm me to see what will cause pain, Greyson presenting what he’s learned about me, and Kane laughing as he tells me what a fool I was to trust him. Laughing as he sinks his teeth into my neck.

Laughing as he drains my body of life and blood.

All of them, laughing.

Laughing at me.

Ice and fire battle in my veins.

The flames scorch their way through my body, searing my thoughts into ash. The ice chases it, burning me with cold instead of soothing the pain.

Hurt crawls under my skin at an achingly slow pace, sinking into my heart and reaching every part of me. Unshed tears build in my eyes as alarm spreads across their expressions. Someone asks what’s happening. Another tells me I’m okay.

Maybe they really do care. Or maybe it’s just my mind invoking what my heart begs for. I can’t tell what’s real as I close my eyes and let myself sink, sink, sink.

The flames can incinerate me.

The ice can freeze over me.

The ground disappears, and I’m floating.

But I’m not truly floating, because something warm and hard and steady is under me. The same warmth presses against my side.

Then I’m surrounded by it, and it’s so comfortable, so safe, that I have to open my eyes. I need to see what—who—holds me like I’m the most precious thing in the world.

Gold fills my world.

It secures me, and in that moment, I know I’m safe and protected.

Red and orange explode in my vision.

Nausea hits me like a wave.

I clench my teeth to keep from vomiting, squeezing my eyes shut against blurring colours as the world spins.

I gasp.

And I’m back in my own body.

The ground stays firmly beneath me as I face the grass on all fours. Mariette and Kane each take an arm, helping me adjust. As soon as I sit, Kane pulls away from me as if burned. Mariette keeps my hand in hers.

The King’s Three surrounds me.

“Are you okay?” Maverik asks, brows furrowed.

“Did it hurt?” Greyson’s expression is tight.

“Does anything feel wrong or off?” Mariette folds her fingers over mine.

“Just no warning, huh?” Kane’s voice rumbles through me.

I respond to his sarcasm with my own, even as I press my free hand to my chest, trying to calm my pounding heart. “You’d think a warning would have been nice.”

“What was that?” Greyson asks, looking over my body as if the answer might be written there.

“I’d like to know, too.” I wrap my arm around myself. Mariette releases my hand so I can do the same with the other, but to my surprise, she pulls me to her.

I blink back tears, swallowing the lump rising in my throat and threatening to escape as a sob. The things my mind brought up had seemed so real. Had felt so real. I was certain they’d grown tired of me—were only keeping me around for what I can do for them.

Now that I’m back in my own body and enveloped by Mariette’s solid warmth and sure arms, I know they weren’t real. They might still be true, but the visions that haunted me were conjured by the pain of my past. By my own fears. They weren’t based on what’s real—on what I’ve seen and heard and experienced for myself.

And even if they were, I’ve survived worse.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

"Drink," Kane commands flatly. He holds his bloody wrist in front of my pursed lips, eyes sparking with annoyance.

The sliver of moon gives just enough light to cast him in ominous shadows, his tousled black hair looking even more ruffled as I shake my head once more. Greyson, Maverik, and Mariette pretend they don't hear us as they set up camp for the night.

"You need it," he growls. His free hand reaches out to yank my arm, but I pull back just in time, hiding it behind my back so he can't see.

"I'm not bleeding."

"You're bruised all over."

"And whose fault is that?" I ask, knowing I sound like a child.

He lowers his wrist slightly to glare at me properly. "We needed to see what you could handle."

"You learned nothing." I jut my chin forward. "And I'm not even bleeding. You can handle it."

His eyebrow twitches. "You are."

"What?" I look down at my unmarred hands then touch my face and neck to find nothing; my pants are still intact, as well.

His hand shoots out, fingers wrapping around my wrist and pulling me to him.

"I can smell it." His voice lowers an octave as he lifts my arm, bringing my wrist close to his face. He doesn't close his eyes, but those golden irises stay locked on mine, darkening as he inhales deeply. I shiver. "If you don't want my fangs sinking into you while you sleep, then drink."

He drops my wrist and shoves his own back in my face.

I crinkle my nose at the metallic scent of his blood.

Without turning, I shout in the general vicinity of his cousins. “I don’t know how you can tolerate him like this.”

Kane growls and steps closer, crowding me. I stand my ground even as everything about him invades my senses.

“It’s better than healing potions, darling.” Maverik laughs. “Tastes worse, but works better.”

“And all of you do this?” I turn to see if he’s teasing me.

Maverik drops a bedroll on the ground near where Mariette starts the fire. Greyson smiles and shakes his head in amusement as he unpacks a bag. “Us, yes. But just us.”

Despite the wolves’ light tones, I get the feeling we’re not to share this with anyone else.

“Drink,” Kane commands again.

“Will you at least tell me where?” I ask as a last attempt at stalling.

His eyes narrow, lips curling to reveal elongating fangs. “What?”

“You said I’m bleeding.” I tilt my head and force my eyes to widen as if he doesn’t scare me. It’s not far from the truth; he looks terrifying, but I’m not entirely sure when he’d stopped truly terrifying *me*. Maybe I’ve finally lost my mind. Maybe his blood will fix that part of me. “Where am I injured?”

“Here.” His eyes stay on mine as his other hand ghosts over the fabric at my ribcage, my vest already having been tossed aside long before we’d even started.

“Here.” His drops his hand, brushing the cloth of the pants at my hip.

Kane lowers so we’re eye to eye. His fingers brush over the fabric at the back of my leg. “There.”

He sinks to his knees before me, dark-gold gaze heating mine as his hand hovers at my shin.

“Here.” He presses his palm to my leg, fingers wrapping around my calf.

I hiss with pain as the fabric digs into my skin, into abrasions I hadn’t known had formed there. Scratches I hadn’t felt now sting, jolting me out of the hypnotic trance of watching someone as powerful as the King’s Justice dropping to his knees before me.

Kane’s free hand wraps around my other calf, tethering me to him. His lips pull into a dark, crooked smile as he looks up at me from his knees. He

knows he’s won.

Without a word, he rises.

Without protest, I press my lips to his wrist.

My heart threatens to beat out of my chest as I close my eyes and breathe through the thought of drinking his *blood*. I’m so focused on ignoring the sickening fact, the feeling of comforting warmth is sudden and takes me by surprise.

I don’t push him away, but when I look up, his face is tight. His jaw is clenched. He breathes heavily through his nose.

Kane catches my glance and blinks, shaking his head.

I inhale deeply, letting the wave of comfort—solace, even—wash over me. Without meaning to, I lean into him. His other hand catches me by the shoulder, and I can’t tell—I don’t care—if he’s pressing me to him or pushing me away.

I nearly moan as relief flows over my cuts and bruises, soothing my aches and pains. But when the last of my wounds heal, my eyes snap open.

His half-lidded, golden gaze watches where my mouth presses against his skin, where my tongue laps at his blood. The rise and fall of his chest matches his laboured breathing, and I want to give in to the temptation of staying in this position just so I can have one more moment of watching him—of seeing that expression on his face.

But his eyes darken, and I remember who he is. What he is.

One mistake—one moment of weakness—and he’ll drain me dry.

I wrap my hands around his wrist; in one motion, I wrench his arm from me and step back, putting distance between us. Not that it’s enough. Not nearly enough.

Not when I want only to step right back into his arms.

“Thank you,” I croak. “That…I’m okay now.”

“Right,” he rasps, almost panting with the effort of the word. “I knew it.”

I clear my throat, heat rising to my cheeks as I look away. “About the… the bath.”

“There’s a lake not far off that way.” Kane regains control of himself faster than I do, jerking his thumb behind him. “Don’t wander off too far.”

“This is no hot pool, but it’ll do.” Mariette glances back toward the camp behind us as she drops her bundle on the ground. The clouds have passed, and the moon is bright against the clear, dark sky.

I place my own bundle next to hers, looking around at every snap and rustle. I hadn’t expected to feel so vulnerable and…unprotected. We’ve hardly spent enough time with the King’s Three to already miss their presence, and I’ve lived on my own for years. Walked alone through woods on nights darker than this many times before and will continue to do so once this is all over.

“A little jumpy?” Mariette asks over her shoulder as she removes the first layer of her clothes, leaving them near our towels.

“It’s just a little quiet,” I answer, doing the same.

She stretches her arms over her head and yawns. “Not so quiet you won’t be telling me what’s going on between you and Kane?”

I ignore Mariette’s sly glance and rub my hands together in anticipation of the cold lake water.

“You’ll tell me,” she warns. “Or I’ll push you in.”

A laugh makes its way out of my mouth. “It’s nothing.”

“Oh?” She stalks closer to me, looking every bit the panther that she is. “If it’s *nothing*, then we can stay in the water as you tell the whole story?”

“There’s no story,” I mumble, thanking the skies it’s not a full moon; I wouldn’t be able to hide my flushed cheeks otherwise.

“Uh huh.” Mariette grabs my wrist and looks me in the eye. “Then you won’t mind jumping in with me right now?”

My mouth opens and closes as I calculate the time it would take to explain.

“That’s what I thought.” She releases me and smirks. “The way he looked at you today? Don’t even try lying.”

“That’s not why,” I protest feebly. “We’re still wearing clothes. We would catch a chill.”

Mariette makes a sound of disbelief in the back of her throat. “Sure, that’s the reason.”

“Well, it’s true.” I wrench my arm back, holding it protectively to my chest as if she might find all the answers in my palm.

“You have until all my clothes are off. Then, I’m throwing us both in.” The glint in her eyes makes me swallow. She grabs her sleeve and pulls. “So you’d better start talking.”

“Okay, okay.” I concede with a laugh. Part of me is embarrassed, but another part—a quieter, unavoidable part—warms even as I fight the dark thoughts from earlier. It’s been a long, long time since anyone has asked to gossip with me, and though I don’t know if this will last, I won’t allow my doubts to keep me from enjoying the moment while I have it.

Mariette pulls her top over her head, and with her face still hidden by the fabric, she pauses. “Really?”

I laugh again. “It’s embarrassing, but as I’ve said—it’s nothing.”

She yanks her shirt off the rest of the way, tossing it to her pile. Standing in her pants with only her underthings covering her torso, she puts her hands on her hips and studies me.

“Are you sure?” She bites her lip, crossing an arm over her abdomen as she grabs her other elbow. “I was aggressive in teasing you, but if you truly want to keep it to yourself, that’s okay too.”

That warmth in my chest grows into a roaring flame. Skies, I hope our friendship persists.

Without a word, I grab her free hand and drag her into the water with me.

Mariette’s laugh turns into a gasp as we race knee-deep into the lake, the cold splashing all around us. Despite the time of night, it’s still warm enough to be refreshing instead of frigid. I release her hand, and together, we walk farther into the water.

“It’s much nicer than I thought,” Mariette says. “Maybe that means your story will be longer?”

I laugh. “No, no. It’s not like that. Honest.”

“So what is it like?” she asks slyly.

With a deep sigh, I tell her about the *nothing* that happened at the hot pool. My cheeks stay warm the entire time; even without the light revealing my embarrassment, it must be clear in my voice.

Her jaw drops with each word, her hand freezing in the air and hovering over her shoulder as she blinks.

I focus on scrubbing my own skin, pretending I’m not affected as long as my hands work on something else.

“And that’s it,” I say with a shrug. “It was one time. Fueled by hate and anger.”

“One time? Hate and anger?” Mariette sputters something unintelligible, waving her hands in front of her.

“What was that?” I smirk, squashing the heat still rising to my face and splashing water at her. “I don’t think I heard you. Use your words.”

She huffs. “The King’s Justice, Scarlet?”

I nod.

“You think that was just a onetime thing?” She lifts a dark eyebrow. “With *him*?”

“What—yes, of course.” Now it’s my turn to fumble for words. “It’s not like he—”

“Do you have eyes?” Mariette interrupts.

“What?”

“I asked if you have eyes.”

“Of course, I do.”

“Then I don’t understand how you’re not seeing the way he looks at you.” A grin splits her face. “You saw what he was like earlier?”

I didn’t think it was possible for my cheeks to redden even more, but I’m proven wrong when images flash in my mind of Kane kneeling at my feet, looking up at me with those heated, golden eyes. Looking up at me as if he’d happily spend the rest of his life kneeling before me.

“You’re thinking about it now.” She points at me. “I can tell you just went somewhere.”

“No,” I mutter, pressing my fingers to my cheeks. “Maybe. Yes.”

“Hah!” Mariette splashes water my way. “I knew it.”

“It was a onetime thing,” I say firmly. “If nothing else, it was a moment of passion fueled by rage and hatred. A mistake. Did you see how much he hates me?”

“I see something, all right,” she mutters.

“Anyway, it would be bad for my health. I mean—the King’s Justice?” I shake my head. “They say he doesn’t know the meaning of love. All he knows is his dragon’s thirst for blood.”

Mariette considers my response as she scrubs her arms. “I don’t know about that. You’ve seen the way he is with his cousins.”

I perk up at the opportunity to change topics. “Speaking of cousins…”

Her laugh rings in the night air. “Now that, truly, is nothing.”

“Oh?” I tilt my head. “I’ve *seen* the way you are around Maverik,” I say, using her words against her. “I saw you grab his arm.”

“Before I go into that…” Mariette sobers, and I stop teasing. “What happened with your transformation? That was my first time seeing it, but

the others…” She shudders. “They seemed just as rattled.”

I suck in a sharp breath and place a hand on my chest. “I’m not entirely sure I can explain it. I was just…and then I just?” I gesture ridiculously.

Instead of laughing like I expected, Mariette only looks concerned.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I don’t know if I am yet, but I will be.” I give her a smile that feels weak even to me.

“They shouldn’t have been hurting you like that.” She looks out at the dark expanse of water. “It wasn’t necessary, and it wasn’t right.”

My smile turns sad. “If it will help us get out of this, I don’t mind.”

“You’re kind,” Mariette says, sliding her eyes to meet mine. “I’m only here because of you, and I don’t mean that in a bad way.”

My throat closes. It’s hard to swallow. I don’t know how to respond, but it brings me back to the moment I’d transformed. “When it happened, I was thinking about how I’m still me, regardless of my form.” I shrug. “In a way, it helped.”

She looks up at the moon as she swallows, her face glowing under its light.

“What is it?” I ask, apprehension prickling my skin.

“And what about when you changed back?” Her gaze stays on the crescent, brightening the green of her eyes. “What were you thinking of then?”

I worry my lip. How do I find the words to explain what had happened? That all the negativity had been in my own head?

“It was like my mind became not my own,” I start. “When they started talking about trying different things against my immunity, something inside of me reacted. I started thinking about how…”

Mariette stays quiet, watching the cloudless sky and giving me the time I need.

Swallowing after a long breath, I continue. “I started thinking about how everyone I’ve ever cared about has left me. And how the Three only keeps me around because of what I can do for them. And…” I play with the water’s surface, watching as it clings to my skin before my fingers rise too high for it to follow. “And how, if we survive, you’ll leave me, too.”

Glancing up at Mariette, I hold my hands out in front of me placatingly, pasting on a smile. “But don’t worry. I would never pressure you into

anything one way or another—again. If you have your plans in place, that's fine. I didn't…I wasn't…I'm not expecting anything from this. From you."

When she finally turns to face me, my heart crumples at the sadness on her face.

"D-does that mean…" I stutter.

What does it mean? I don't know the words I can't choke out.

Mariette stares at the cuffs on her wrists as a small smile forms. "I don't know where I will go once this is over, but I can tell you this, Scarlet." Her lips stretch into a grin that reaches her eyes. "I have no intentions of abandoning you."

"Oh," I whisper, turning from her when tears spring to my eyes. Just hearing the words—whether she truly means them—heals something in my heart. "I mean…if that's what you want."

She laughs, and though there's still a sadness to it that I don't understand, I don't pursue it. Not tonight.

"Now, about Maverik…" Mariette tilts her head with a shrewd look as she pulls the ties out of her hair, slipping both over her wrist to rest against a cuff. "He approached me, but I turned him down."

I gasp, hand flying to my mouth. "He did? You did? Why?"

She shrugs. "He's one of the King's Three. Nothing could ever happen between us, and I have no desire for that to change." Mariette's green eyes flick to mine, ensuring she has my attention as she continues. "You have to be careful too, Scarlet. These men…as normal as they might sometimes seem, they're not. They've done horrendous things. Killed an unspeakable number of people just because they were tasked to do so. Innocent, guilty, or whether they deserved it, none of it matters to the Three. Those men belong to the king, and that makes them so much worse."

I suck in a breath. She's utterly serious—and completely right.

"I was just teasing you earlier. You can do whatever you want with Kane—once, twice, every night, I won't judge—but what you need to understand is that none of them can be trusted. Not where it matters. I'm only looking to survive, and I would very much like for you to survive, as well."

All trace of brevity disappears, leaving only the two of us considering the gravity of our situation. Forced by circumstance to work with the most powerful shifters of Selerune and needing to remember none of this is real

—not the jokes, not the banter, not even the kindness. Not when it comes to the King's Three.

I let out a long breath.

"But I guess I don't mind a little flirting." Mariette chuckles, breaking the sombre spell.

"Surviving and flirting," I say in my most serious tone.

We nod at each other, silent for another moment.

Then we burst into laughter.

When we return to camp, they're already seated and eating. Maverik notices our entrance and shifts over, making space on his log. Mariette winks at me, and we share a giggle before she takes the seat.

Dinner passes quickly and without a hitch; it's late and everyone is tired, but before Mariette and I are released to our bedrolls, Greyson spreads his map on the ground.

"Tomorrow, we continue in this direction." He drags his finger from one spot to another, the parchment crinkling against the grass. "Since we lost the scent around here, we'll check this next location given the reports of activity there."

"What type of activity?" I ask with a yawn. Kane glances at me from his seat across the map.

"Similar. Gouges and marks that don't fit with what we expect from the area and its shifters." Greyson answers without taking his eyes off the map, reaching into his pocket to retrieve a pencil. In one fluid motion, he draws a symbol over where we'd found the wagon. He looks up at me. "But we have to prepare for what we might find."

A shiver races up my spine. I rub my arms despite the layers I still wear, all drowsiness gone. "What might we find?"

"We lost stone scouts here," Kane says. His eyes, gilded by the fire into a deeper gold than usual, leave a trail of heat on my body everywhere he studies. They stop where my hands rub my arms, so I cross them in front of me instead. He doesn't look away as he continues, "Not an insignificant number, either. And we now suspect it's related to the markings."

Mariette exhales. "What do we need to do to prepare?"

Clouds pass over the moon, hiding its light and casting shadows over our group. Greyson runs a hand over his chin as he thinks, silver eyes looking from the panther shifter to me. “I think we’ve established we can’t leave you two alone.”

Mariette scoffs and gives her wrists a shake. “You could—if you’d just remove this unsightly jewellery.”

Kane dismisses her suggestion with a wave.

“It’ll be best for everyone if you come with us, especially if it does turn out to be a base,” Greyson says. “From what we know about the Rebels, they’ll make a base for one of several reasons.”

He lifts a finger for each item he lists. “There’s either enough of them in the area for them to need a home base, or they need the space to create or modify artifacts like the ones used to cast the domes. They might also use a base as storage for their stolen goods, such as silence stones. If they’re smart—and I believe at least some of them are—they’ll want to avoid risking their entire supply in one place.”

“Or,” Kane says, looking at the map. “If we’re lucky, we might stumble upon the place where they create Red-Eyes.”

Greyson nods gravely, lowering his fingers. “The bigger—and more important—the base, the more likely they’ll have silence domes protecting it.”

“How likely do you think this next location will be an important base?” I bite my bottom lip.

The wolf shifter takes a deep breathe, tilting his head. “Given the reports, sightings, and disappearances, I’d say there’s a good chance we’ll encounter silence domes. It will just be a matter of size and number.”

Greyson reaches behind him and pulls out a dagger. Using the pointed end, he drags circles and lines into the soil next to the map. “From what we’ve seen, bases protected by domes typically have layouts like this. Depending on what they’re protecting, the domes can be anywhere.”

“It doesn’t look like anything special,” Mariette mutters, leaning forward to look at the drawing.

Maverik laughs. “Of course not. They’re Rebels!”

She glares at the wolf shifter, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

“It’s not the complexity of the encampment, but what they’re protecting.” Greyson taps the tip of his dagger on the soil, looking at me

and Mariette. “We would usually break in by way of brute force, but that’s not exactly the best option right now, so we’ll use stealth.”

The cousins draw several additional maps of potential base layouts, explain methods of identifying silence domes, and clarify what Mariette and I should look for in case we—skies forbid—need to run off on our own.

The competence of the King’s Three is obvious in the clarity and efficiency of their explanations. It seems they’ve been working together for a very long time; they predict and immediately understand each other’s intentions, demonstrating their effectiveness as a unit in a way I envy. None of my relationships have lasted long enough to build anything close to what they have with each other.

Even without Kane’s multiple warnings about fleeing, the more time I spend with them, the more I’m convinced we will never escape their clutches unless they release us. No matter where we go, they would find us.

The next day, I’m hot, uncomfortable, and vibrating with anticipation. The sun has just fallen past the horizon when we near the location of the next suspected base, and despite the woods around us casting strange, elongated shadows, I’m grateful for the coming night to shield us in its darkness.

We dismount, but Maverik moves to arm himself, attaching the massive sword to his back with the speed and efficiency of someone who’s done it countless times. Silver threads wrap around his body as shifter magic takes over. In seconds, his wolf form emerges, the dusty fur looking almost steel blue in the light of the rapidly setting sun. Without a word, he takes off.

It still shocks me how quickly they can shift, considering I was used to some shifters taking as long as an entire minute.

I turn to Kane, and despite my silence and having his back to me, he grunts, “What?” before my mouth even opens.

Glaring at the back of his tousled head, I make a rude gesture. “Where’s he off to?”

“Going ahead to check what we can expect,” Kane answers, tossing an apple over his shoulder without looking at me. I lift my hands and catch it before it hits my chest. “If it is a base, he’ll confirm the perimeter and get

an idea of the layout. On his way back, he'll scent out any traces of Rebels nearby, too."

"Ah." I make eye contact with Mariette, who crosses her arms as she leans against a tree, looking displeased. I don't like the uncertainty, either.

As she and I prepare for another stint of hiding and staying out of sight and out of way, Kane strides over to me. The look he wears has me fighting confusing urges to keep from pressing my legs together while calming my rising hackles.

"If you—"

"I know, I know." I wave a hand in the air. "Don't be spotted. Don't fight back. Don't even think about tripping."

He growls and crowds my space. I roll my eyes as if his closeness doesn't bother me at all.

"And if—"

"If someone somehow manages to get past Maverik, scream." I square up against him so we're nearly chest to chest—or rather, my face to his chest—and I look right up into his golden eyes. "Scream, and you'll come."

He grabs my chin with his thumb and forefinger, pulling me even closer. I press both hands against his chest, feeling his sturdiness beneath the lightweight armour. I force my breathing to lengthen. I will my expression to stay defiant. But his nose flares, and he stiffens, eyes widening slightly as desire darkens his countenance.

What do I smell like? my mind whispers.

I ignore the growing heat in my core and lift my eyebrows even when we both know he can tell just how affected I am.

"I will come," he snarls quietly, his feather-soft breath contrasting the rough fingers on my chin. "And if even one drop of your blood has spilled, I will tear the camp apart. I will not care about Red-Eyes. There will be no survivors."

Chills race down my spine. I know he means it as a warning. That he won't be able to hold his dragon back. But it also sounds like a promise. A promise to hurt anyone who hurts me.

A promise to keep me safe—not for his control nor for his dragon, but for me.

"You know there is an easy solution to all this?" Mariette's sharp voice rips me from my absurd fantasies and slams me back into my body. I tear

myself from Kane’s grasp; his hands drop to his sides as I step back, maintaining a safe distance of at least two paces.

We turn to the brunette, and she shakes her wrists in the air.

Kane ignores her, walking to his horse and strapping two swords to his back. I swallow at the loss of heat.

“We might be dead by the time you find us,” Mariette says flatly. “Imagine that happens while you’re worrying about a little drop of blood.”

Kane’s shoulders tighten and he freezes while strapping daggers to various parts of his body.

“That won’t happen.” Greyson brings both his and Maverik’s horses over as he arms himself with bows of various styles I’ve never seen, along with several quivers of arrows. “Maverik is very good at what he does.”

He winces as he checks his weapons. “Don’t tell him I said that.”

“We’ll see,” I say with a smile. Maverik might seem silly and carefree, but to my surprise, when I’d expected him to protest at being our minder while his cousins wreaked havoc, he didn’t seem to care at all. He even shared suggestions to better stay in the perimeter and within our reach. For all his jokes, he knows when to be serious.

“It’s still a risk.” Mariette clicks her tongue in disapproval. “An unnecessary one.”

I roll the apple from one hand to another. I don’t want any senseless deaths, and I certainly don’t want Red-Eyes prowling Selerune. If any of those vicious shifters had attacked a town like Grengrove, we wouldn’t have stood a chance, especially when we’d have to wait for the next town’s Dracori to arrive and assist.

“We’ll clear the area first,” Kane says with finality.

We wait in tense silence for Maverik’s return, but when the wolf emerges from the trees, his eyes are wide and his jaw panting.

Kane and Greyson immediately leap to their feet, weapons readied as they surround their cousin while he shifts.

Mariette and I rise as one, my head swivelling in the darkness that had felt like safety mere moments ago. My friend clutches my hand and pushes me behind her.

Maverik completes his shift and speaks, words hurried. “There’s a base for sure.”

I inhale. Kane and Greyson lower their swords but keep them drawn.

“They’re getting ready to leave. Everyone’s packing things up and tearing the base apart for a swift departure. It looks as if they were recently attacked, and judging by the remains, it was likely Red-Eyes.”

I swallow rising bile.

Greyson shakes his head. “Why would they turn on their own?”

“Unless something went wrong.” Kane’s brow furrows. “Either they are disagreeing with each other, or something has gone wrong in whatever process makes them this way.”

“Regardless, I didn’t note any fresh trails. Whatever happened occurred outside of their base, and it seems no one has left the perimeter in a while.” Maverik’s silver eyes slide to me and Mariette. “You two should be safe here.”

“Oh, okay,” I mutter like an idiot. “What about the silence domes?”

Maverik nods. “Several. At least three around the area. Two are big enough to keep one”—he looks me up and down—“maybe two of you within. And the larger, surrounding a cabin, at the center.”

He rubs his hands together as a grin spreads on his face. “And with the, shall we say, expediency at which they’re packing, I’d say there’s a good chance we’ll find a decent supply today, cousins.”

Mariette relaxes, and I step forward to stand next to her.

“Are we just to remain in hiding, then? Even with the Rebels all around and the Red-Eyes having turned on them?” I glance at the silence stones on my friend’s wrists.

“You’re right,” Maverik says, tapping his foot. “I’ll hang farther back, but you two should stick with me. Stay out of sight and out of the way, but I’ll be much closer.”

Greyson nods. “I didn’t pick up on anything, so if you didn’t either, then it’s unlikely anyone will approach. But to be on the safe side, Kane and I will take care of the base while you get any stragglers.”

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Kane warns me before turning and walking away.

Greyson gives me a small smile as he pulls dials and knobs on the guard covering his arm. It isn’t until he loads several small knives onto it that I realize the braces attached to his gloves must be a type of single-handed bow of some sort.

He waves, striding away and catching up to Kane.

“Well, ladies? Are you ready?” Maverik winks before leading us in another direction.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

The sky darkens faster than usual, given we're deep in the woods and the trees above vary in height, their leaves and branches providing ample cover from any bird shifters who might be scouting above. We leave the horses and continue on foot while Maverik guides us through the dense forest, looking around and tilting his head in different directions as he listens and scents for things with abilities I can't possibly imagine.

Even though we're with one of the most powerful shifters, Mariette sticks close to me, keeping one step behind me the entire walk until Maverik pauses.

"This seems like a decent enough spot," he says, studying the particularly thick foliage around us. "Lots of places to hide, and"—he stops, brow furrowed slightly to listen—"close enough I can hear what's going on."

That's when I notice the thin strands of barely visible magic swirling around him like full body armour. Not only does it require extreme precise command of his shifter abilities, but tempering the magic so it's only visible under the darkness of night because it glows—likely undetectable in the day—is just another testament to the Three's fearsome reputation throughout the kingdom.

"If you say so." Not for the first time, I am grateful Maverik is on my side. At least for now. When Mariette doesn't reply, I glance at my friend.

Her shoulders are tense, and she's extra pale as her eyes flicker all around us, lingering every time she looks at the darker parts of the woods.

Without thinking, I reach out and lace my fingers through hers. Giving her hand a squeeze, I offer a small smile even knowing I should be paying

attention to what Maverik is saying.

“What’s the plan now? Do we just wait?” Mariette asks, squeezing my hand back and relaxing slightly. But her complexion doesn’t change, and she continues warily watching our surroundings.

Maverik shrugs. “Yeah, I guess so. Once the guys start, I’ll head out as well. The chaos they sow will help me engage without revealing your location, minimizing chances of rousing suspicion that I’m sticking to one area.”

Mariette releases my hand. The wolf shifter watches as she paces.

“Do you three do this often?” I ask, biting my lip. I don’t want him to stress her out further if he starts asking questions; as much as I feel protected by the cover of night and foliage, they must unnerve Mariette. I’m used to human vision and senses, but she likely feels blinded and vulnerable without access to her panther’s powers.

“Raid Rebel camps?” Maverik turns to me with a raised brow and a half smile.

“Ah.” I stutter, blushing. “No, I mean…I don’t know what I mean.”

My shoulders slump in defeat—why am I so awkward? And Maverik is the easiest to converse with! At least I’ve taken his attention from Mariette.

Thankfully, he only chuckles. “We switch things up often. We’ve been friends a long time, my cousins and I. We’ve had plenty of time to consider strategies and tactics and figure out how each of us operates.”

“Did you grow up together?” I ask, glancing at Mariette, who still looks so stressed she doesn’t appear to notice any of our conversation.

The wolf shifter smiles as he unsheathes a dagger, and the expression is one I don’t think I’ve seen before. He flips the blade in the air, the handle landing firmly in his palm each time it drops. “Yes.” Maverik tilts his head, grin spreading. “Though Grey and I are older than Kane.”

My brows furrow as I watch his dagger flip in the air. “How much older?”

“Not by much,” he says. “But you should know better than to ask a wolf for his age.”

His wink makes me laugh, effectively undoing one of many knots of worry in my stomach.

“Are you twins?” I suddenly ask. He and Greyson look remarkably alike, and I know very little about the royal family, aside from rumours heard in passing. Some say there are no other living members because the

king had them murdered to stay in power. Others think the rest of the family consider themselves too good for Selerune and have created their own estates on the outskirts of the kingdom to live in opulence where squalor cannot touch them.

"Me?" Maverik gasps, pressing a hand to his chest in feigned insult. "With my incredibly handsome features, you think I could possibly be his twin?

Mariette scoffs, though she doesn't join our conversation.

He points at the panther shifter. "You too?"

She shakes her head before looking out into the thickness of the woods once more. Without turning, she says over her shoulder, "You certainly do share a certain…look."

"My hair is white-blond, whereas his is silver-white!" He drags a hand through his long, pale locks, pulling several pieces to the front and twitching the ends at Mariette.

She waves a hand in the air, refusing to respond.

"You know, it's funny that your wolf's fur is grey, but his is white." I tap a finger on my chin.

Maverik snorts. "Mismatched names, right?"

He sheathes his dagger and checks the other weapons on his body as another knot of anxiety unwinds in my tight chest, though Mariette's back remains stiff with her constant glancing from shadow to shadow.

Despite the giant sword strapped to his back, Maverik moves effortlessly, each movement fluid and perfected by decades—possibly centuries—of practice.

"He was just a kid when we first met him." Maverik's voice softens as he slides a small knife back into his boot. He tilts his head, but whatever he heard must not have been what he was waiting for. "We were barely older, but we were."

I stay quiet, letting him delve into memories from long ago. Mariette stops pacing, keeping her gaze trained in the distance.

"We were just kids ourselves, but we knew better." He stays crouched to the ground, hand going to the back of his other boot. "We knew it shouldn't have been…like that."

When Maverik stands, he looks out at a spot in woods, eyes glazed not with tears but a deeper sadness. "Back then, there were a lot more of us—

maybe not as many as my child's brain remembers, but enough that it should never have happened. Yet, it did."

I want to ask what he means, but his haunted expression keeps the question trapped in my throat.

"We couldn't have left him even if we'd wanted to. We knew he was one of us from the first time we stumbled into that dungeon." He drops his head to one side, looking at me from the corners of his eyes as moonlight and shadows draw out the deep, residual anger from his sad smile.

"The dungeon—?" I ask, but am immediately interrupted when Maverik lifts a hand in the air, raising a finger from the other to his lips.

"Sorry," he says with a lopsided grin, all traces of previous melancholy gone as he reaches for the sword at his back. "It's time to play."

Maverik unsheathes the massive blade and rests it on his shoulder as if it weighs nothing. With a quick wave, he turns, reminding us to scream if we need him as he dashes into the trees.

I rub my hands on my arms and glance at Mariette, who looks as nervous as I feel.

As much as they've reassured us of our safety—and even having watched each of the King's Three in action—I can't shake the feeling of dread. It's been a long time since I've been able to trust and rely on anyone other than myself, and now doesn't seem the moment to start.

"This was a stupid plan, right?" Mariette asks into the air.

I swallow, pressing a hand to my stomach and hoping to calm the rolling discomfort. "We might have explored other options."

She stops wearing the grass into the ground, striding over to me and lacing her fingers through mine. With a squeeze and a determined look, Mariette nods. "This just confirms men are idiots."

The serious expression coupled with the unexpected, brutal candor makes me laugh.

She gives my hand another squeeze before releasing me, staring down at the dull black gems on her wrists. "I will do my best to keep you safe, but without my panther, I don't know if I'll be able to do more than buy you time to run."

My heart clenches. "Between the two of us, I might be more adept at fighting without magic."

Mariette turns her head so quickly, I nearly step back from the burning intensity in her gaze. "If something happens, you have to run. Promise me,

Scarlet.” She grabs my hands and looks deep into my eyes, her greens searching my browns for something I can’t understand. “You have to. We can’t risk you getting injured. Not a single drop, you hear me?”

“You’re starting to sound like Kane,” I say, my laugh nervous and high pitched.

“It’s not about—” She shakes her head. “Promise me, won’t you?”

“I can’t promise something I can’t keep.” I flip our hands so I hold hers in mine. “You’re here because of me, and I have more experience fighting without powers. I’ve been doing it for years. If anything happens, we’ll face it together.”

Mariette’s eyes gleam with unshed tears as my own vision blurs.

“It’s my fault you’re here. I was desperate, and I was stupid.” My voice trembles. “I was scared. And I’m scared now, but I won’t leave you.”

Her face crumples. “You don’t understand, Scarlet. It’s not just about us. It’s about so much more than just you and me and Kane and Maverik and Greyson.”

“What do you mean—”

“But I’m not here because of you.” Mariette sniffles with a watery smile. “Maybe in this forest and on this hare’s chase across Selerune for one thousand silence stones, yes. But I was in that dungeon because of me. My own choices brought me there, and by extension, here. On this absurd opportunity with you. It was my own doing, and no one else’s.”

“I won’t leave you,” I say once more.

She shakes her head. “You have to. It’s not just you or me—there’s so much more at stake.”

I know they need to find the Red-Eyes. I know Rebels will only wreak more havoc the longer it takes for the Three to stop them. But I still can’t find it in myself to even think of abandoning my one and only friend.

“Please,” she whispers. “Please. Promise me.”

I can’t say the words, but at her broken look, I finally nod.

“Good.” She exhales, every muscle in her body relaxing. “Good.”

Mariette releases my hands, and I wonder what I’ve just promised—how I could have done such a thing.

Especially when something growls behind us.

We turn and meet the glowing red eyes of a large grey wolf. Saliva drips from her pointed teeth, and she sways.

My heart leaps into my throat. I want to back away, but fear keeps me rooted in place.

Terror forces memories of that night into my mind, replacing those torn bodies with mine and Mariette's as more red eyes blink through the shadows of the woods.

We're surrounded.

Turning only my head, I count at least three wolves—that's just what I can see without moving—but Mariette likely sees more from her point of view.

Some wolves snarl while others growl; all are unfocused.

All seem unsteady on their feet.

But if we scream now, we'll shock them into action.

They will surely pounce.

Some plan the King's Three came up with.

"Damn that Maverik," Mariette whispers, keeping her eyes trained on the wolf in front of us.

I dare to glance at another emerging from the shadows as she wobbles and nearly trips, snapping at the air.

As if reading my mind, Mariette joins me in slowly shuffling our positions until we stand back-to-back.

Her powers are silenced.

Mine are useless.

Neither of us is armed.

"You see what I see?" Mariette whispers. Without needing to point, I know she's referring to the one spot between two trees without a wolf.

"Yeah." I don't risk nodding. "On three?"

A wolf stumbles out from between bushes, blinking its red eyes as if emerging into light from the darkness.

"One," Mariette whispers.

The one in front of us drops her head. We stiffen more—as if that were possible—when the wolf sniffs the ground. Saliva pools on the dirt under her snout, and my stomach curdles when I realize it's bloody.

"Tw—" I start, but something flashes in the corner of my eye. The small sphere of light dims almost immediately, but in the breaths before it disappears entirely, I think I see a human's silhouette.

"NO!" Mariette roars, yanking me with her as she darts into the woods.

It takes only one heartbeat to see the wolves have focused.

It takes another to realize they're pouncing.

My legs pump under me, guided by Mariette's tight grip on my wrist as we sprint into the darkness.

"Kane!" I shout his name into the night sky before I even know I'm doing it. "Kane!"

"Help!" Mariette's frantic voice joins mine as we make as much noise as we can, hoping—praying—someone will hear us. "You fools!"

"Kane, you absolute idiot!" I scream, jumping over a tree root and ducking from a branch.

Behind us, the snapping and snarling and growling get closer.

"What a horseshit idea!" Mariette shrieks.

"We have to stop!" I barely avoid stumbling. "We can't outrun them."

"You're right." Mariette gasps for breath, pushing me ahead of her as her eyes widen with fear. "You need to go. I'll—I'll hold them off."

"I said I'm not leaving you." I point at a large tree. "How fast can you climb?" Without her panther's stamina, she's rapidly running out of breath. We have to stop.

She nods. "Fast enough."

As one, we pivot and continue sprinting until we reach the tree. Each grabbing hold of one side, and with its bark sharp against the skin of my palms, we climb.

Even without her panther's agility, she's quick. But with every bit of height she claims, she stops to wait for me.

"Go!" I hiss. "You can help me once you're up."

Pale faced, Mariette squeezes her eyes shut and nods once before making her way past two thick branches. She hoists herself over the third and looks down at me, face tight with worry as she extends her hand.

I reach for my next gnarled handhold, the sounds of wolves snarling through the woods chasing each step I climb. Except for their terrifying promises of pain and death, they traverse the forest in complete silence; it's almost as if they wend through the woods without crashing into anything at all despite barely being able to stand just moments earlier.

"Quickly!" Mariette snaps. "Come on!"

She stretches her hand further, as if even just a fingertip's reach might make a difference.

I want to squeeze my eyes shut in fear. I want to close myself off from the rest of the world and pretend my heart isn't about to burst from my

chest. But the pleading in Mariette's eyes forces me to stay focused—forces me to find another foothold.

Even as a broken, gargling howl tears through the night and strikes fear into my chest, I continue climbing until I slap my hand into Mariette's.

Her grip on my fingers is tight enough to bruise as she strains to haul me up. The hard bark scrapes against my vest, but it's enough to protect me as I shimmy and shift onto the branch, taking a seat next to her.

Resting my back against the truck, I pant, feeling its sturdiness beneath and behind me. My hands reach down to my sides, clutching the bark.

"Skies, you're going to take years off my life," Mariette says between gasps, panting just as hard.

"Hey, it worked, right?" I lift an eyebrow, but the growling gets closer.

She swallows the retort and snaps her mouth closed. We peer over the branch just in time for a brown wolf to burst through the darkness and run right past our tree in a blur.

Another joins the first. Then a ruddy-brown one stops and sniffs the base of our tree.

Neither of us breathes.

The ruddy wolf throws its head back and howls.

The sound sends ice through my veins, and my hands clutch tighter at the bark holding us in safety.

"Stay here." Mariette's pale face tightens as she changes her stance, looking down at the vicious wolf below. "I'm going to drop on her and distract—"

I open my mouth to protest. She can't possibly join the fray, especially without her panther. Red-Eyes are violent and aggressive. They're out of their minds and will rip shifters apart before consuming them. They'll eat her.

Before I can speak a single word, a large, grey streak tackles the brown wolf. Without warning—without a sound—he silences its howling song forever.

The grey wolf moves so fast, I can barely pick out the chaos. With a snarl and a twist, he throws another Red-Eyes across the grass and out of my view.

It isn't until he slows that I finally let out of a breath of relief. Mariette's white knuckles, hands gripped so tightly at the branches around us, loosen at the sight of Maverik's massive form.

He looks up, silver eyes narrowing in warning as he immediately finds us in the trees.

He means for us to stay here.

Mariette exhales a long breath as she leans back onto her heels.

She'd been moments from jumping. Maverik had come just in time.

Two more wolves burst from the trees.

I watch in horror as they launch at him from either side.

But Maverik is faster.

And bigger.

He snaps his jaws wide, ripping one wolf out of the air and throwing them aside. Wood snaps with a loud crack as it collides with a tree.

The other aims for Maverik's hind leg, but he turns, darting out of the way just in time. He launches forward, smashing his head into the Red-Eyes's snout. It whines with pain, stumbling back in retreat, but Maverik pounces.

Another two join the chaos, they're no match for Lord Maverik.

He's bigger, faster, and stronger—there's little doubt he will defeat them.

Tentative hope flutters in my chest through the hammering of my heart as I watch the havoc below. I don't even think to look above—not until leaves rustle.

Not until branches break.

Not until red-hot pain explodes in my shoulder.

Mariette screams, reaching out for me as I reach out for her.

Our fingertips brush.

I'm lifted away.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

"Kane!" The name rips itself straight from my heart as talons dig deeper into my shoulder, shredding muscle and sinew alike. Each flap of feathered wings cleaves my mind with radiating agony.

I can't keep looking down; can't watch as my friends and the trees shrink beneath my rising feet. My head spins. My vision blurs with unshed tears of pain.

With a gasp, I force myself to look up at my assailant.

My eyes land on a thick, scaly leg connected to the black giant talons embedded in my shoulder. Its twin hangs in the air just above my head, twitching as if it can't decide whether to join the other and clutch onto my body as well.

The higher we rise, the colder the dread in my veins, but each beat of its wings sounds laboured; the feathers ruffle unevenly, as if my added weight has unbalanced it. Taking a deep breath, I clench my teeth and reach up to grip onto those talons and hold myself in place. Just as my fingers brush the claw embedded in my shoulder, a strangled cry tears from my lips when we drop. My arm flails uselessly to my side as it flaps harder, the motion bouncing us unsteadily through the air, my feet just brushing the treetops.

I let out a muffled groan as it squawks with the effort of taking us higher, its wings flapping inconsistently just to keep us from crashing into the tallest trees. I clench my teeth and gasp with the effort of staying conscious through the radiating pain.

We drop again, and I force myself to look down. The trees below us are thick; their branches will likely break my fall enough to avoid too many injuries if I can get the shifter to release me. But we rise higher with each

passing moment—in choppy, uneven motions—and my resolve weakens as I stare down hopelessly at the ground.

Then a streak of colour below catches my attention.

Not colour—a shadow.

I barely glimpse its lithe black form against the dark of night. But it's there.

The shadow moves so quickly, it's a blur in my periphery, disappearing if I look directly at it as it sprints over the treetops and wends through the forest, leaping from one tree to another, racing forward as if desperate to catch us.

To catch me.

The blur moves fast—it might even rival the Three—and it is nearly below us when the bird squawks above me.

I have to act before it catches sight of the shadow.

Tightening my core and using every ounce of courage left, I take a deep breath and lift myself. I gasp as my vision goes white from the red-hot pain flashing through every part of my body, painting every corner and crevice of my mind. But I hold myself steady as I rise until my free hand wraps around its thick, scaly leg.

Another squawk. Another bump against nothing in the air.

I bite my lip to keep from crying out.

I don't let go.

Its wingbeats turn erratic as it croaks and dives left.

My stomach flies into my heart. I pant through clenched teeth, digging my nails into its scaled leg. It tightens its grip in response.

I think its talon hits bone, but the electrifying pain cuts through my fog of fear and ignites anger.

I will not be maimed by an oversized chicken who can't even fly straight.

Gritting my teeth, I take a deep breath and squeeze my eyes shut, wishing I had something to bite. Because this will really, really hurt.

I tighten my core once more, exhale to calm myself, and inhale deeply to fill my lungs with air—and hopefully courage and strength, as well.

Then I swing my legs back.

The sudden, explosive pain wracks my mind, lighting every bone in my body.

The bird makes an ugly noise of protest, swaying with me and nearly dropping us both.

When I swing forward, it releases another indignant sound, wings flapping heavily in its effort to keep us stable.

A whimper escapes my clenched teeth as I rock back once more. I force my limbs to move and add to my momentum as I swing forward; it's just enough to flip me upside down, unbalancing the bird as I wrap both my legs around its thick, scaled one.

It screeches in surprise, wings freezing midair.

But my grip is weak, and my feet can't find each other to lock themselves around its leg. With a shriek, I slip off.

The momentum is too much for it.

Despite the frantic beating of its wings, it can't lift us fast enough.

And the blur of shadow is just below us.

The shadow launches into the air as we continue losing elevation.

I can't hold back the shriek ripping from my lips to join the bird's shrill scream as a giant cat—no, a *panther*—clamps her mouth on the bird's neck.

She takes all three of us down.

The talons releasing me hurt nearly as much as when they went in.

I lift both arms to protect my head, expecting the harsh hit of smashing into branches snapping one after another as we tumble into the trees.

But only a few breaks before I land on solid ground.

When I dare open my eyes, I only see darkness.

Then I realize I'm on my back. I groan as I roll over, freezing at the sound of a low, nasty growl.

I lie on my stomach on the ground, trapped—or protected—beneath the four furry legs of a large, black panther.

She presides over me, crouching and barely leaving room between me and her chest. Her dangerous growls vibrate the air around me as she drops even lower, her fur brushing the top of my head.

Then she disappears from above me. I turn just in time to watch her body slam into a tree.

"No!" Shifters heal faster than the shiftless, but instinct forces me to push off my uninjured arm and scramble toward her, heart in my throat.

It's Mariette. It has to be.

Even without seeing those bright green eyes, I know it's her.

The sickening crack of her body against the wood will stay with me for a long time.

She lies motionless at the tree's base even when I drop to my knees and approach. Behind us, the bird—a Red-Eyes—stomps its feet in anger. In my periphery, a canine of some sort tackles the bird. Maybe they've fully lost their minds and turned on each other. The two, similar in size, squawk and growl as they roll and tumble off to the side. They can deal with each other. For now, I have to make sure Mariette is okay.

I crawl closer to the panther, sighing in relief at the rise and fall of her chest. But her eyes are still closed, and I can't tell if she's hurt without inspecting her body through the fur.

My hand hovers in the air, trembling; my other hangs limply at my side, the throbbing pain from my shoulder radiating down the entire arm.

She'd been silenced for some time, and I don't know if it affects the efficacy of her healing…or the state of her mind.

"Mariette," I whisper. "Come on."

The squabbling intensifies behind me. Good. I hope they continue—better yet, I hope they take each other out.

Where in the skies is Kane?

"Come on, friend." My heart skips as the dark snout twitches.

Stupid Three.

Stupid plan.

Stupid men.

"Get up," I hiss. "Or do you want to get eaten? I know you wouldn't like to go down without a fight."

Someone emits an unnatural, guttural scream; every hair on my neck and arms that isn't already standing immediately rises.

"Mariette!" I snap, terror ripping through my body as her paw wiggles. "Get up!"

An uncomfortable, cold dread pools in my stomach when the Red-Eyes go silent.

In seconds that drag into hours, I turn.

Slowly.

Slowly.

Slowly.

And come face to face with the canine.

It's not a wolf nor a dog. It's not even something in between.

With his misshapen snout and rolling red eyes, he makes his way toward us on unnaturally long legs that buckle every few steps. Crimson-tinged drool drips from his pointed teeth. Behind him, the bird gurgles, those strong talons sticking up in the air at strange angles.

Still on my knees, I let out a sharp breath and push back on my heels. Every muscle tenses, but my hands clench at my sides, useless and empty as adrenaline thankfully masks the pain I know still swirls beneath my fear.

The skies curse those stupid men—they couldn't have at least given us one single weapon?

The canine stumbles, his entire head smashing into the ground with a long whine.

I grab a fistful of dirt in my uninjured hand. He pushes his face against the sparse grass in his awkward attempts to rise. Debris scratches my palm.

Skies *curse* all three.

I take a deep breath and forget them.

I'm here now. It's just me.

This is like being in The Cage.

I'm just facing a difficult opponent.

Just like that bear guy—what was his name?

He was unhinged. A little feral.

I defeated him, didn't I?

I survived.

"One last chance," I hiss at Mariette. She doesn't respond.

The Red-Eyes stands, jaw open in heavy pants. Thick drool drips. I shudder at the feathers stuck between those dangerous teeth.

Skies curse them. I'm on my own.

Daring to peer back at my unconscious friend, my spine turns to steel with my resolve. I carefully rise onto my feet while remaining crouched, steadying my breathing and tightening my core.

We're on *our* own.

She's not alone. I'm not leaving her.

Those three may be stupid, but they'll come.

Kane will come.

I take another deep breath and exhale the fear. I won't let this be the end of my story, nor will this be the end of Mariette's.

The canine's red eyes roll back and forth.

I shuffle to the left, hoping his gaze will follow.

But he sniffs the air and continues his way to Mariette, blinking at her vulnerable form.

My instincts scream to run, but my heart demands I stay.

I have to stand between this monster and my friend, even if it means I will get hurt. I have to do what I can. I have to protect her.

I just have to survive until Kane comes.

The canine's unsteady steps take him in Mariette's direction even when his eyes roll in his head, unfocused and unseeing. If he gets a bite of me, he'll want more. I'll lead him away from her first, then I'll find a weapon. An actively bleeding wound won't be ideal, but at least the blood would pour.

Maybe then Kane will come faster.

He has to.

I return to my position in front of Mariette, standing between her and the bloodthirsty creature.

His gaze refocuses, finally locking on me.

For one heartbeat, neither of us moves.

Then I throw the dirt.

He bursts through the cloud of dust and debris, crimson eyes rolling in anger. Jaw open and tongue lolling for a taste.

My heart skips.

I don't run.

I turn and throw myself over Mariette.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I spread my arms over as much of her furry body as I can and wait for the inevitable pain.

Warmth bursts from my chest, mixing with the ice in my veins to create the strange sensation of floating.

Skies, don't let me transform now. Not when I need to protect as much of Mariette as I physically can!

Light explodes, bright even behind my closed eyes. Something sizzles loudly, followed by a high-pitched whining. Then a hard thud I feel in the soles of my feet.

I swallow a gasp of fear and dare to look.

At first, everything is too blue—too bright.

I blink rapidly, waiting for my vision to adjust. When it finally does, I lift a hand to my throat—except it's a paw that rises.

And when I peer out into the distance, the Red-Eyes is nowhere near us.

He’s lying on his back several paces away, legs twitching in the air as if thrown back by an invisible force.

I shake my head and look again. He wasn’t thrown by some invisible force. He must have been thrown by the translucent, blue dome surrounding me and Mariette.

Getting all four paws beneath me, I turn back to my friend, whose panther form is significantly larger and much more terrifying now that I’m so small. Her ears flick back and forth, and she makes a feline groan.

I slide off her furry midsection, careful to avoid putting weight on my injured side, and approach the blue glow around us, my tail swishing to keep my wobbly legs balanced.

The Red-Eyes barks and jumps to his feet, hobbling toward us. I retreat, stumbling back into Mariette. Pain shoots through my paw and up my shoulder, but I stay standing. She groans again, this time moving slightly.

I try to hiss her name, but a real hiss escapes instead.

Right. I can’t speak in this form.

The canine flings himself at us. I flinch.

The sheer dome sizzles, strands of silver-blue magic bunching where he collides against it.

He’s thrown through the air, landing hard on the ground and sliding even farther.

I poke Mariette, then limp forward once more until my nose nearly touches the gossamer circling us. I’ve never seen magic like this. Like a shield. I think I should be afraid, but something from deep within me—from a place I can’t explain or even begin to understand—tells me I have nothing to fear. I lift a paw and, against all reason and logic, rest it on the light-blue dome.

Nothing happens.

I stretch my neck and give it a sniff—then remember I don’t have the enhanced senses of a natural-born cat.

The Red-Eyes still twitches on his side without a sign of rising, so I dare to give the shield another test and press my paw harder against it. I lose my balance.

Falling through the magic, I land hard on both paws, jerking as pain shoots through my body. But the front half of my body is outside, while my rear half stays firmly blurred behind the blue gossamer shield. With a jolt, I

retreat until all four paws—and all my whiskers—are back within the safe confines of the strange dome.

The Red-Eyes slowly pushes himself up.

My lips curl as my heart races. If the magic let me out—and back in—will it now let him in, too?

I limp back until I press against Mariette's warm side. Without thinking, I lift a rear leg and push it against her, extending my claws just enough so I know she'll feel them.

I may be smaller as a cat, but at least I have sharp claws and teeth. I have to believe they count for something.

The Red-Eyes stands.

My hackles rise with him.

My lips pull upward, wrinkling my nose with an involuntary hiss.

Mariette finally awakens, slowly pushing to her feet. I don't dare take my eyes off the canine, but I feel it the moment she understands what's happening.

The Red-Eyes focuses on us again.

A streak of grey slams into him.

He's gone before he even lands on the ground, blood gurgling from his open throat.

Relief floods my body, all four of my knees weakening as I lean heavily on Mariette.

They've come.

"Where is she?" Greyson's panicked question booms ahead of him before he bursts through the trees. His wild eyes look all around, sliding right over us.

I stiffen.

We're right in front of him.

Does he not see us?

Maverik opens his jaws and releases the Red-Eyes, hopping away from the body. He lowers his nose to the ground, sniffing in every direction.

Behind me, Mariette's low growl vibrates the air around us as she rises to her full height.

"Where is she?" Greyson asks again, dragging a hand through his light locks. "She can't have gone far."

Maverik sniffs the air. Drops back to the ground.

I wish I had my human mouth—I want to shout that we're right here.

Maverik steps forward and pauses mere steps from the translucent shield, nose so low to the ground he nearly inhales the soil beneath him.

“Fuck those Red-Eyes!” Greyson kicks the mangled canine body. “Where the skies are they?”

His outburst makes me pause; I’ve come to expect something like that from Kane, and I wouldn’t have been surprised even if it had been Maverik. But of the Three, Greyson is the more docile cousin and usually holds himself back from such aggression.

Magic whirls around him like armour as Maverik roves the area, nosing through every patch of grass and disturbed dirt.

The realization comes slowly as I look up to meet Mariette’s bright green eyes.

Even without words, we both know they can’t see us. Can’t smell us. Can’t sense us at all, apparently.

A thunderous roar shakes the very roots of the forest.

Kane has arrived.

All at once, hot and cold fight for purchase. I squeeze my eyes shut, steadying myself for the transformation I now recognize with the flurry of sensations.

When I look up, the bright, magical shield has disappeared. In its place is Mariette’s panther body, her dark fur blocking the moonlight.

She crouches low to the ground, pressing her ribs down against the top of my head as she hisses and spits, her growls sending vibrations rumbling through me.

An answering roar makes her hiss again.

Back in my human form, I peer out from between her legs and swallow my gasp.

The golden dragon stares down the black panther; his thick, scaled tail whips from behind his armoured body, bringing with it bloodied feathers, flesh, and fur.

“Wait a minute!” Greyson’s voice rings out. From my low vantage point, I can’t see him, but I can hear his rushed steps. “Wait!”

Dark boots dare to stop in front of the dragon. Greyson ignores the dragon’s angry grumbles.

Another pair of boots enters my field of vision, but these are close enough to block out everything else. The panther hisses and spits, staying firmly crouched over me.

“Where the hell”—Maverik groans—“Never mind. We don’t have time.”

Without waiting for Mariette’s permission, he drops to his knees and reaches through her front legs.

By instinct, I scramble back from his outstretched hand—until I notice the glass vial clutched between his fingers.

Dark-blue liquid swirls within it.

“Is that—” My hoarse voice scrapes my throat.

“Healing potion,” Maverik interrupts roughly. “Take it. Take it now!”

I glance up at the black fur above me, but Mariette doesn’t make a move. She could have bitten his arm off. She only growls her dissatisfaction.

“Sometime this century—*before* Kane loses to the dragon, hm?” Maverik barks.

The panther hisses, but she lifts just enough for me to feel the urgency from her, as well.

I take the vial, wincing as I jostle my injured shoulder to uncork it; the pain was more tolerable in my cat form. The healing potion is sweet with a floral aftertaste—better quality than anything I’ve ever received from Spencer and his healers—and I nearly groan at the immediate feeling of my wounds beginning to mend.

It doesn’t happen as quickly or as smoothly as it does when Kane forces me to drink his blood, but if a smidge more pain means I don’t have to face his bleeding arm again, I will gladly down more. Especially if they taste like this.

“Done?” Maverik asks.

I make a sound of agreement.

“All healed?”

“Almost,” I croak.

“Good,” he says. “You can rise.”

The panther hisses and spits once more before moving until she no longer shields me from the moon nor the chilled night air.

The sudden loss of her protective, warm body makes me shiver, and I test my healed shoulder as I lift myself tentatively off the ground.

Kane is already mid-shift, the swirling silver magic wrapped all around his massive dragon’s body. Maverik stands, studying me with his shrewd gaze. Greyson glances back before watching Kane complete his shift.

A soft, sturdy weight presses against my hip. The black panther's shoulder bumps me again, bright green eyes blinking up at me.

I exhale and extend a hand, letting it hover in the air. Despite her protectiveness, it isn't until she presses the top of her head into my open palm that I'm truly certain she's still wholly herself.

"Oh," I whisper with realization. They removed her silence stones. They really, finally removed her silence stones.

"I had to." Maverik shrugs. "She couldn't take them on her own while silenced, and I wasn't sure how far the bird would get."

The glowing magic dissipates from Kane as he crosses his arms, eyes narrowed into a glare.

"Did you eat everyone again?" I ask, suddenly annoyed as I glance at the surrounding bloodbath. "You said you'd come."

His glare intensifies.

"We told you it was a stupid plan." I dig my fingers into the thick fur of Mariette's neck, drawing comfort from her heat.

If his eyes could throw knives, those knives would have sliced me to ribbons.

"Unfortunately, we were also preoccupied." Greyson steps forward, giving Kane a glare of his own. "Red-Eyes arrived shortly after we did, but instead of helping the Rebels, they joined in the wreckage, devastating anything and everything—including their fellow Rebels. We weren't going to find anything there. Not even if they hadn't been slaughtered by their own."

He turns from his cousin and pins me with his narrowed, silver gaze. "But there's something else I need to talk to you about."

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

"Yes?" The seriousness of Greyson's tone gives me pause, and I glance at the cousins. Greyson's shrewd gaze studies me as well as my surroundings, though Maverik seems more relieved than angry. All three cousins are covered in blood, though it looks as if Greyson and Kane fought their way through an army.

"Where—" Greyson starts.

"Where were you?" Kane roars. He uncrosses his arms, but his hands clench into fists at his sides. Anger sharpens the angles of his face, and he looks about one remark from throwing me over his shoulders and carrying me into the distance. The blood smeared over his skin is a stark reminder I wouldn't be able to fight him if he tried.

"Right here," I say. My chest tightens at the intensity of his gaze. It's not the same look from before.

I'm used to anger, hatred, and disgust.

I'm not used to…fear.

I'm not used to relief.

I'm not used to Kane looking at me as if he wants to take me somewhere and hide me from the world, looking as if he wants to keep me safe and protect me from everything and everyone.

"You were not," Kane barks. His eyes flash with yet another emotion I can't quite understand.

"What our friendly dragon is trying to say is…" Greyson looks to the dark sky as if struggling to find the words. "There wasn't…"

"You were completely gone," Maverik says bluntly.

Mariette makes a noise that sounds suspiciously like a scoff.

The wolf shifter narrows his eyes at the panther.

“Gone?” I repeat stupidly, shaking my head. “But we were right here. You just couldn’t see us.”

“Or smell you. Or sense any trace of you.” Greyson nods at Mariette as he unlatches something from the shooting device fixed to the fingerless glove on his other hand. “Either of you. Both of you.”

“It’s exactly as it sounds,” Maverik adds, running a hand over the top of his hair. “You two were just gone.”

“And then you reappeared,” Kane says harshly. His rough voice drags my gaze back to his, and I swallow at the unfamiliar expression he doesn’t bother hiding. “Care to explain?”

“Shouldn’t we talk about what happened with you guys first?” I sweep a hand at the wreckage before us. “Were there any silence domes? Any stones?”

“Explain.” Kane’s amber eyes pin me to the spot as if he were holding me there himself.

Greyson nods in agreement as he glances around the area with a heavy sigh. “Everything else can wait.”

Right. There’s no one left for urgency to matter. I tilt my head, avoiding the look on Kane’s face. He’s not worried about me for me. He’s worried for himself. “I don’t know how to explain it, but I think it had something to do with the cat form?”

Greyson perks up, stepping forward before his cousin can interrupt. “What makes you think so?”

I gulp, turning slightly from Kane as I search for the words, knowing he won’t be happy with what I’m about to say. “The Red-Eyes were fighting amongst themselves. Mariette was thrown, and she wasn’t moving.”

I glance down at the black panther. She presses her shoulder to my hip, and I shake my head, murmuring, “No, you don’t have anything to apologize for. You saved me.”

She doesn’t seem to agree.

Neither does Kane.

I dig my fingers into her fur, letting her warmth give me strength as I explain, taking the King’s Three through what I remember. Greyson asks several questions while Maverik stays silent, but Kane’s anger is a tangible thing as I near the end.

“And when I felt the sensation of changing, I thought it was a terrible time to transform—but at least I’d have claws and teeth, right?” I let out a nervous laugh. It does nothing to improve Kane’s mood, but at least Maverik chuckles. “Even through my closed eyes, I saw the bright light. When I finally looked, the Red-Eyes was sizzling and twitching as if he’d been thrown back.”

When I describe the magical shield, Greyson hums, lifting a hand to his chin. I wince when he notices the state of his bloody fingers, dropping them and crossing his arms instead.

“Doesn’t that sound familiar?” he asks the other two.

Maverik makes a noise of agreement. “Silence dome?”

Kane grunts.

“That’s what a silence dome looks like?” I recall the translucent-blue, shimmering magic. “But why would it have protected us?”

“Are you sure that’s what it did?” Greyson nearly taps his chin again.

“I don’t think there’s any other way to interpret it.” I lift both eyebrows. “It kept the Red-Eyes out, going so far as zapping him with magic and throwing him when he tried to rush us.”

“And it sounds like it didn’t keep them *in*, either,” Maverik adds. “So it seems they could have left at any time.”

“You’d think,” Kane snarls. “You can’t know for sure.”

My brows furrow, suddenly feeling defensive if only because of his antagonistic attitude when he’s the one who had promised to come. “I am quite sure, and I wouldn’t have had to test that out if you hadn’t left us with that dumb plan of yours.”

Maverik coughs, but he does a poor job of hiding his laugh. Kane’s lips curl.

Greyson clears his throat. “You did mention you were able to step out—at least in your cat form.”

“Just half,” Kane snaps.

“I have no reason to think it wouldn’t have let me wholly through,” I say, echoing his tone. “It barely felt like anything when I stepped out.”

“It stands to reason the second half could have followed the first, yes.” Greyson gives me a wry smile as if he understands the absurdity of Kane’s anger. “In any case, it does sound exactly like what we’ve been struggling with. I imagine it must be related to your venihira blood, though I’m not yet sure how. Are the venihira people of protection, I wonder?”

He tilts his head the same moment Mariette trips.

“Are you okay?” I ask, crouching to look at her. “Are you hurt?”

She shakes her head and blinks up at me, releasing such a deep rumble it takes a moment to realize she’s purring.

I can’t imagine how satisfying it must feel to finally be back in her animal form. As a shifter forcibly silenced from her magic, it must have been like losing access to a part of herself, so I don’t blame her for not shifting back—especially if she’s still feeling a little awkward in this body after such a long time.

“Maybe…” Greyson looks down at his hands, then he shakes his head. “If it is what I think it is, maybe there is more of a connection between venihira, shields, and silence domes than we initially suspected. Do you remember having cast it at all?”

“No.” I bite my lip. “I didn’t even know about it. I was just thinking I couldn’t leave Mariette.”

Mariette’s rumbling purrs stumble as she huffs.

“Stupid, by the way,” Kane mumbles.

The panther huffs again and dips her head in agreement.

“Not as stupid as that plan was.” I look up at the Three in exasperation. “Really? Not even a single weapon?”

Maverik and Greyson have the good sense to rub the back of their necks, sheepishly refusing to make eye contact with me. Kane’s eyes narrow, as if still blaming me.

“We’ll arm you,” Maverik says quickly. “But I think it’s time we take a look at the base, especially if Grey’s right about the relationship between venihira and silence domes.”

I refuse to look away first, but Kane seems adamant as well. We stare each other down until the cousins take the King’s Justice by an arm each, and Mariette pushes me with the bulk of her body.

The destruction left in the wake of the King’s Three and the Red-Eyes will haunt me for a long, long time. I previously thought nothing could be as bad as the most ruthless shifters of Selerune, but somehow, it’s obvious—even to my inexperienced eyes—which parts of the wreckage

were caused by those monsters, and it makes the Three's devastation look kind by comparison.

I swallow the nausea and breathe in through my mouth. "Where is it?"

"Just up ahead." Greyson jerks his chin forward.

Though Mariette wanders off, she generally sticks to my side as we make our way through the remnants of the Rebel base. She must have enhanced senses in her panther form, because every so often, she walks away and sticks her nose right against the ground, reminding me of Maverik.

Mariette stops mid-step, head popping up when I look in the direction Greyson points.

Beyond the wreckage is a small cabin with no windows. Despite its mismatched wooden walls and uneven logs, it's the only structure in this area still standing. Everything else—tent, cabin, and otherwise—bears the marks of battle and destruction.

"The other two disappeared, but this remains," Maverik says over his shoulder.

My breath catches in my throat when the clouds shift, and moonlight sparkles against the shimmering dome. The glow surrounds the cabin entirely, like a shield erected to withstand exactly the surrounding havoc.

Just like the one that protected us.

"But this, like the others, we can see. We couldn't see yours." Maverik scratches his head. "And we can see what's inside of it, too."

"What are those?" I take several steps forward. "What—hey!"

Kane grabs me roughly by the arm and yanks me back. I stumble when he turns me toward him, my hands landing on his chest to stabilize myself as I glare up at him.

"Don't," he says, pushing me aside while simultaneously releasing me. "Did you not see what that thing did to the Red-Eyes?"

I huff and run a hand down the front of my vest, wincing at the blood drying on one side. "I did. But I wasn't reaching for that."

"Could have fooled me," he scoffs.

"What were you looking at?" Greyson asks kindly.

I take two deliberate steps from Kane before walking forward once more, pointing at the ground.

Maverik tilts his head one way. Greyson tilts his the other.

“She’s inspecting dirt.” Kane drags a hand through his hair and looks up at the sky. “She’s finally lost it.”

“I’m not—look, it’s right there!” I crouch and point more fervently at the flat, round stone on the ground, light-blue swirls glowing on its surface.

Three men furrow their brows at me. Mariette strides over and sniffs the spot right next to the stone before tilting her head.

“You guys can’t see it?” I look from four confused expressions back to the strange rock. Then I look at the second stone, similarly glowing, on the ground in front of the cabin’s other corner. “Or that one, either?”

Four pairs of eyes turn to the direction I point. Four pairs of bewilderment turn back to me.

“Can you describe it?” Greyson asks, giving the translucent shield a wide berth as he crouches beside me.

“It’s a rock,” I say dumbly. “It’s a flat, round rock the size of my fist with markings. It has a swirl on top, like this…” I draw the shape in the air with a finger. “The swirl glows light blue.”

Greyson murmurs something under his breath.

“Sorry, what was that?” I ask.

“Is it pulsing?” He strains to look around, trying to see what only I can.

“Um.” I glance at the rock lying innocently on the ground. “Yes. Faintly. Does that make a difference?”

“I’m considering the possibility.” Greyson stands and faces the shimmering dome. “I’m going to show you what happens when we touch it. The shield, I mean.”

I rise with him. “But didn’t you say it—”

The loud zap of magic crackles as it courses through Greyson. He exhales hard, but stays standing. He doesn’t even groan.

Instead, he retracts his hand and shakes himself like a dog, shuddering. “Skies, that was unpleasant.”

“It would have been worse if he’d slammed himself against it.” Maverik hums, slapping a hand on Greyson’s shoulder to help steady his cousin. “It seems to repay your intention tenfold.”

“Exactly why you aren’t being careful enough,” Kane grumbles.

I shoot him a glare before pretending I didn’t hear him. “And you guys want me to…walk through it?”

Greyson puffs his cheeks, blowing air out and shaking himself once more. “No, not exactly.”

“Just touch it, maybe?” Maverik’s tone lifts on the last syllable, sounding as if he’s asking a question instead of making a statement.

Mariette takes a delicate step in front of me, surveying the ground before placing down another paw. Once stable, she presses her entire side against me, pushing me back with the bulk of her body.

“Okay,” Maverik says, raising his palms and looking Mariette in her green eyes. “I don’t mean to touch it with her whole hand like he did. Just one finger. And gently. It won’t be that bad.”

Her dark lips curl, revealing bright-white teeth.

“She has to.” Kane’s arms flex as he crosses them over his chest. “We need to know.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “So the one pulling me back is now the one pushing me into it?”

He tilts his head, looking at me as if I were stupid. “You were about to run headfirst into a wall of powerful magic. The magic would have repaid you tenfold for that *and* sent you flying fifty paces back.”

“This is a gentle touch.” Greyson gives a smile that I’m sure is meant to be reassuring, but unease swirls in my chest after having witnessed what it did to him.

For once, I’m glad for Kane’s ridiculous and disgusting healing blood. I don’t need to know how it works. I don’t *want* to know how it works.

I just hope it will work if I’m hurt by the silence dome.

“Fine.” I straighten my back and take a calming breath. “I said I would do this, and I will. There had better be a whole lot of silence stones in there.”

Mariette makes a sort of choking noise in the back of her throat, and she steps in my path. I avoid her and ignore my thudding heart.

Holding my breath, I press one finger on the glowing gossamer.

And slip right through.

The men collectively inhale sharply before bursting into questions.

But their voices sound muffled to my ears as I watch my hand sink farther into the ethereal blue magic. Its gauzy texture seems to coat my skin, but I don’t feel anything different; I think I’m just seeing myself through the dome’s filter.

Will it hurt if I push more?

I breathe out and extend my arm farther, pressing forward until the magic engulfs all the way to my elbow.

When nothing happens, I take a step.

“Wait—”

“Don’t—”

“Ack!” A thick arm wraps around my waist and yanks me hard enough to wind me when I collide with the wall behind me. I hold the arm to stabilize myself, gulping air to regulate my breathing while the silence dome glitters in front of me as if nothing had happened.

The growl of dissatisfaction rumbling against my back sends heat rushing to my core at the same time annoyance flares in my mind.

Kane grips me tight, pressing me against him. I can’t turn to fully face him, but I make sure to inject as much venom as possible into my glare when I look up to meet his fierce stare.

“What was that about?” I ask. “You were the one who wanted me to try.”

He clenches his teeth, jaw working. “If you go all the way in, you might not get to leave.” Kane dips his head until his lips brush the shell of my ear. “And if we can’t get in, Garnet, how can we get you *out*?”

A shiver races down my spine, and it’s not because he has a good point. Shifting uncomfortably against him, I freeze. Heat spreads from my core and my cheeks flush. Maybe I’m not the only one affected.

Still, I squash the inappropriate thoughts and squeeze out a retort.

“Who says I need you to get me?” My breathy reply gives me away, and I immediately feel his reaction to it pressing against my backside.

“Each time you nearly die, you affect more than just yourself, remember?” The low gravel of his voice makes me shudder as the heat of his words wraps around me, going straight between my legs.

“Maybe you just need better control.” My voice is just as rough—just as low.

He twitches against me, and I bite my lip to remember where we are. What we’re doing here.

Greyson clears his throat but is interrupted almost immediately.

I jump, cracking my head against Kane’s as I push off from him.

He releases me, and though my cheeks are surely flaming, if I hadn’t felt the hard evidence for myself, I’d have thought he was completely unaffected.

Maverik wraps his arm around Greyson’s neck to throttle him. Greyson’s hand pushes against the wolf’s biceps, his other palm smashing

into Maverik's cheek.

Kane's watching me, but when the two cousins notice my stare, they freeze and untangle themselves from each other.

Maverik gives me a small wave and smile. "Don't stop on our account."

Flame continues licking my cheeks. "I'm not—we're not—"

"So she can pass through without a hitch. It's just a matter of how we'll get her back," Kane says, ignoring Maverik's comment.

"You were the one who wanted me to try, weren't you?" I don't know why I'm being contrary for no reason; he's not wrong.

Kane doesn't bother answering me, either. "Grey, what was your theory about those rocks she can see?" He glances down at me. "They're still there? Still glowing?"

"Yes," I answer. Then I can't help but mutter, "Now he wants to talk to me."

His eyes narrow.

Greyson looks at me for a long time before finally speaking. "I think the reason we haven't been able to penetrate these silence domes is because they're part of an older magic we haven't seen in a long time."

"Venihira magic?" I ask, heart picking up in pace.

"If not, then it's at least related." Greyson's eyes flick from me to the ground, then to the silence dome. "From what you've told us, what we've seen, and what we *can't* see, I'm willing to bet that is exactly why we've had so much trouble."

"What happens if you break the stones?" Maverik strides closer, arms crossed as he watches the glowing perimeter. "Will the shield fall apart?"

"Point to it exactly, and we'll find out," Kane says from my side. "If there are any repercussions, we will survive them."

I shift my weight from one foot to another. "It's worth a try."

Mariette's tail sways, but she doesn't growl in protest.

Maverik nods. "Come on, let's get going. I'm ready to leave this hole and clean all this off." He grins at his cousins as he gestures to himself, his own armour significantly cleaner than theirs.

"There." I point at the stone closest to me and mark the ground with my boot, then stride toward the one on the other side of the hut, and point to a third. "And there are two others around the back as well."

Kane nods. "I'll start with this one, and we'll go from there."

He unsheathes one of the two swords from his back.

“Is that going to—”

Magical strands burst from his arm, flowing until they swirl around the hand holding the hilt. He glances my way, smirks, then brings his sword down.

Even without seeing his target, the aim of the King’s Justice is true. The rock splinters into several pieces, the glow of the marks sputtering as they dim and flicker out. Kane tilts his head in expectation.

Nothing happens.

“You probably missed.” Maverik draws the massive sword from his back, swinging it in the air before looking down. “Where is it?”

I hide a smirk when Kane scowls. “He didn’t miss. The bits aren’t glowing anymore.”

“Ah.” Greyson crouches, studying the scattered dirt and reaching for a jagged piece of broken rock.

I tilt my head. “How did you—”

“It appears breaking the stones also breaks—or drains—its magic. They’ve revealed themselves.”

“The wall is still intact, though.” Kane watches the light-blue swirls of the translucent shield.

“It’s flickering,” Maverik says, resting his sword over one shoulder and narrowing his eyes. “It’s weakened for sure.”

Greyson studies the piece in his hand. “I wonder if the one that trapped you two had stones as well, and we simply couldn’t see them.” He shakes his head.

Maverik grins at me. “Would have been helpful to have had your eyes then, Scarlet.”

The Three make quick work of the remaining stones, each revealing themselves to the shifters once successfully broken. The shield surrounding the cabin fades with the markings of the last stone.

The five of us, Mariette still in her panther form, stand in a line facing the makeshift front door.

“After all this time.” Greyson frowns. “The solution was quite literally before our eyes.”

“You couldn’t have known,” I say, my brows furrowing as anxiety bubbles in my chest. What were the Rebels so desperate to hide? How many stones will we retrieve?

“What are we waiting for?” Maverik approaches the door and kicks it open, sending the wooden panel smashing against the far, inner wall. He flashes a wide grin at us from over his shoulder. “Let’s see what we’ve been missing out on.”

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

This cannot possibly be it. I turn on the spot, looking dubiously at the surrounding four walls, each devoid of signs of life, as Maverik echoes my sentiment.

"We've been trying to break into these things for *this?*" The wolf shifter returns his sword to its spot on his back, bending to dig through a pile of books—one of many scattered throughout the single-room cabin. "There aren't even any people in here."

"Careful with that," Greyson snaps at his cousin. "Can you take a moment to look at the words before casting them aside?"

"They're useless." Maverik picks one up, tilts it toward a flickering lamp, and reads the title. "*The Lunar Tales.* That's what you're telling me to be careful with, Grey. Not research notes."

Greyson grumbles but returns to his own pile as Kane knocks on the floorboards, listening for hollow spots.

The cabin—more like a hut, really—is no more than a room filled with two tables and some chairs. Books cover every surface, with several piled on the ground in the corner where Maverik continues his riffling. I fight the disappointment welling in my chest as I look sadly at Mariette's dark form.

"There doesn't appear to be any silence stones here," I whisper, crouching at her side and hugging her furry neck. "I'm sorry."

She nudges me with her cold nose and taps her head against mine. Then she pulls out of my embrace and pads around the room. With a groan, I rise and follow her lead. There must be a reason this cabin was so heavily guarded; even if we don't find silence stones, maybe something of higher value can be used to barter for our pardons.

“They seem to spend a lot of time with books,” Kane mutters, picking up two and adding them to the table. Greyson doesn’t look up from studying the pile.

Maverik snorts, waving more titles in the air. “They’re not even worthy of note. Listen to this. *Shifter’s Solstice. The Queen’s Final Curse. Tales of Selerune’s Heroes. The Wicked Venihira Queen. Seluria and the Sky.* They’re all children’s stories.”

Greyson looks up at the same time I ask, “What was that?”

“*Seluria and the Sky*,” Maverik repeats, shaking his hands in mock reverence. “The story of how Selerune’s flourishing capital improved the lives of all its citizens.”

“No,” Greyson says. “The one before that.”

Maverik’s eyebrows knit together as he looks down at the books he’d tossed, picking through them one at a time. “*Shifter’s Solace*? No. *Tales of Selerune?* No. Ah!”

He stands, looking closer at the cover. “You’re thinking *The Wicked Venihira Queen* will have something?”

Greyson takes it from Maverik and places it on the table next to the book he was already reading. The rest of us crowd around him, with Mariette rising onto her rear legs to catch a glimpse as well.

“Look at this.” Greyson closes the other book and pushes them together, pointing at the faded titles on their covers. “This is called *The Wicked Venihira Queen*, and this one is called *Listen to Your Parents*.”

“So?” Maverik asks the question also swirling in my mind.

Greyson opens his book and flips the wrinkled, yellowed pages, stopping halfway through on an old depiction of three women surrounded by at least five or six cats. The picture might have been created with colour, but time has erased enough from the pages that what shades and hues remain are indiscernible from one another.

“It can’t be a coincidence there are so many cautionary tales warning children of the venihira,” Kane says. “Why haven’t we heard of them until now?”

I keep my eyes trained on the faded page. Mariette knows about the venihira, but she hasn’t mentioned them except the one time, even when Greyson brought them up. If she doesn’t trust the Three, I won’t be the one to betray her.

Greyson shakes his head. “I don’t know. But we’ll send Uncle an update—hopefully before the Rebels return and clear the stash.”

“Speaking of stash…” Maverik gives me a wide grin. “Guess what I found?”

“What?” I ask warily.

He returns to the corner where he’d been looking at the pile of books, raps his knuckles against a wooden floorboard, and pushes it open.

Maverik reaches down into the open space beneath and lifts a dark drawstring pouch the size of his palm. I lift my eyebrows at the clinking when he shakes it in the air.

“Is that what I think it is?” My voice trembles. I can’t quell the mixed emotions battling in my mind. Finding silence stones would be incredible, but I can’t ignore the bag’s tiny size considering the massive effort the Rebels had put into guarding this cabin—and from Maverik’s pleased smile, I don’t think there are more satchels hidden under those boards.

“It sure is.” The wolf shifter walks toward us and opens the pouch, peering within. “And it looks like maybe fifty or sixty in here. Maybe even seventy!”

My jaw drops. “Maybe even seventy?” I ask weakly as thoughts of freedom fade to smoke slipping between my fingers.

Maverik nods, closing the string and slipping the pouch into a big pocket on the side of his pants. “Pretty good haul.”

I force a smile; these men have a different understanding of the passage of time. Shifters live longer than the shiftless, and it’s not unheard of for many to have a natural lifespan of several centuries. The more powerful shifters are even rumoured to be immortal, but because no one is unkillable, it’s difficult to know for sure. For the King’s Three, getting seventy stones out of one thousand is good—to them, it means we’ll be done quickly. But what does quickly mean when they might live forever? How many more bases, how many more raids? How many more days will we travel, chasing one lead after another, risking life, death, and limb, until freedom is finally mine?

I swallow even though my throat feels too dry.

“Do you think the Rebels were protecting the stones or protecting the books?” I ask, changing the subject. If I dwell on it, I will crumble.

And I will not cry in front of them—especially in front of Kane.

I’m the one who begged to be here. I will survive this.

The heat of gold eyes lingers on my skin, but I force myself to sift through the pages of a book; if I meet his gaze, I fear he might read every emotion I'm fighting to suppress.

"Given it's the first time we've been able to break into a dome—much appreciated, by the way—I fear I can't give you an answer. I will, however, take some books with us." Greyson glances longingly at the stacks. "Let's give everything a once-over before we head out."

After counting the number of silence stones with us—seventy-eight—Maverik writes a note including our names and the Three's seal before slipping it into the pouch and safely tying the string closed for delivery. We spend hours reading while Mariette, still refusing to shift back, curls into a ball in the corner of the cabin and rests. I don't blame her; despite Kane's annoyed grumblings promising she'll retain her magic for the duration of our time together if she'll help with the books, I wouldn't put it past the King's Justice to lie simply for an additional pair of eyes while we're here.

When the sky brightens, my joints ache and my sleep-tired mind can no longer focus on the words in front of me. Instead, I think about the small number of stones in that minuscule drawstring bag. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad working with the King's Three—even if it takes years to collect one thousand stones—when they've been kind enough so far.

But Mariette doesn't trust them, and at the end of the day, we are still their prisoners. Only King Waylon's approval can provide us with the pardons we need, and only his seal can protect our futures.

Maybe there's another way. Greyson mentioned his appreciation for my help with finally breaking into a silence dome—maybe there's a chance he'll ask whether my aid can be used toward lowering the number we're required to retrieve? I can't imagine there are many others with the ability to see the glowing, blue markings responsible for silence domes, and it seems venihira are extinct.

Which leads me into a line of thought I'm not strong enough to question right now.

I yawn and stretch, adding my final book to the pile without information about venihira or Red-Eyes. Glancing at the three stacks near Greyson, I

ask, “How are we going to take all those with us?”

The indignation of his huff is one I’d never have imagined from the mild-mannered, intelligent shifter. “I won’t be taking them all. I’ve sorted them into tiers.”

Kane lets out a wolfish bark of laughter. “Yeah. Sure. Now you know the true reason behind our abnormally strong and sturdy horses.”

“I never hear any complaints when you all benefit from my research,” Greyson grumbles, dropping his head back into his book.

“It’s true.” Maverik shrugs, flippantly tossing another tome onto a messy pile at the foot of his chair as his eyes slide over to Mariette’s sleeping form. “Without all that knowledge, we wouldn’t have come up with things like his map system, or even figured out those magical incendiaries.”

Greyson doesn’t acknowledge the compliment, but his lips pull into a small smile.

“Everyone’s done?” Kane adds his last book into a pile, eyeing Greyson.

“Just about.” Maverik glances at the title of the one in his hands, flips through the pages without truly looking at the words, then sets it down. “Now I am.”

Kane rolls his eyes, but we all perk up when Greyson rises.

“I’ve decided we will take all of these.” He waves his hands at his three stacks. “I will fetch our horses.”

Kane gives me a knowing smile; I cough to hide my laughter.

Greyson returns far quicker than I expect, but Kane and Maverik both shrug, saying, “Great horses,” as if the two words explain anything.

Maverik pulls a pack from the bags strapped to his horse, dropping the satchel of silence stones in, pouch and all.

I thought the pouch was made of material that blocked the stones’ effects—something I’ve only heard of but never seen—but watching as he groans and rolls his neck and shoulders, I suspect it is a normal pouch, and he must have simply ignored the silencing effects.

“Thank the skies that’s over with.” Maverik shudders and checks the straps of the pack and then the bag once more to make sure the stones are secured within. “Couldn’t wait to be rid of that. What a terrible feeling.”

I stare at him before sliding my eyes down to Mariette at my side.

His mouth opens in silent realization before he runs a hand over his light hair. “So about that…”

The panther and I turn our gazes to Kane and Greyson. The wolf shifter shrugs.

“Your call, Kane.”

I cross my arms.

Kane sighs. “Silenced or not, we’ll find you if you try to run. Do whatever you want. I don’t care.”

For a moment, Mariette only narrows her green eyes at the dragon shifter. He glares back at her, but something in his demeanour must convince her. Silver light bursts from her form; her shift takes longer than either of the wolves, but she’s still faster than anyone else I know.

Mariette rolls her neck and stretches. “That was nice of you. I suppose.”

“Nice?” Kane scoffs. “We’re doing you—our *prisoners*—a favour, and that’s all you have to say?”

“Yep.” She walks right past the King’s Justice and hops onto Maverik’s horse.

Both wolf shifters hold their laughter in, but Greyson does a decidedly better job. Maverik coughs and changes the topic, asking, “Are we doing this or what? I can’t wait to get out of here.”

“You guys go ahead,” Greyson says, glancing back at the cabin and its open door.

“Going to take a second look at those books?” I ask with a grin.

He smiles back. “Something like that. I’ll catch up.”

Kane and I ride in silence. Even when I mutter “Thank you,” to his back for letting Mariette travel without the cuffs, he only grunts in response. I bite my lip and avoid thinking about his mood—he’s probably cranky from having stayed up all night reading—allowing the rhythmic gait of the horse and warmth radiating from his body to lull me into a semi-conscious state.

When the horses slow, I can’t tell how much time has passed. I blink and try to rub the sleep from my eyes; Kane’s fingers loosen on my wrists so I can lift a hand to my face. “Are we there already?”

“No.”

We’re still in the middle of the nowhere and surrounded by nature; we can’t have been riding for long, especially because Greyson hasn’t caught up yet. Even when I squint into the distance, the woods are as thick as they’d been before we’d started travelling.

“What are we doing, then?” I look up, alarmed, when Maverik dismounts, leaving Mariette on his horse as I glance at her with worry. Have they gone back on their word? Are they silencing her again? “What are you doing?”

“Just sending a message back to Uncle.” Maverik shifts, the silver strands radiant even in the quickly brightening day.

In one motion, the light-grey wolf steps out of the magic and tosses his head back, releasing an eerie howl as he dashes into a low opening between the trees.

Without meaning to, my arms tighten around Kane.

“He’s always so dramatic,” Kane mutters. Louder, he adds, “Mav’s checking in with natural-born wolves of the area to send an update back to the castle, letting Dracori know the location of the cabin to send retrievers for we left behind.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised he can communicate with other wolves,” I mutter. How many rare abilities do the Three have? Communication with the natural-born versions of a shifter’s animal isn’t a skill I thought I’d encounter in my lifetime. Then another thought gives me pause. “And the…there are Dracori who can also speak with natural-born wolves?”

Kane turns in his seat to pin me with a look of disbelief, eyebrow lifting high and stretching his scar. “No. He’ll explain to the wolf, then he’s going to attach a note for the Dracori. With words. On parchment. Just how common do you think this ability is?”

“Well, I barely thought it existed at all, so clearly my understanding of rarity is skewed.” I peer up at him in defiance, but there’s no hint of anger or contempt in his golden eyes. Only bemusement.

“Yeah, that’s it,” he says with a quirk of his lips.

I push him back around, and just to spite him, I mutter loudly enough that I know he will hear, “So even the King’s Three have to send messages like us commoners.”

Kane barks out a laugh. “If there’s anything common about talking with the natural-born, then sure. You can call it that.”

I bite back a smile and pretend none of this—not his laugh, not his jokes—warm me from within.

It doesn’t take long for a wolf to accept Maverik’s request, because he returns in his human form moments later.

Looking at the low rising sun, he says, “Maybe it’s time we all get some rest.”

“And give Greyson a chance to catch up,” I add. Their third still hasn’t joined us, and it makes me uneasy despite Kane and Maverik both appearing unbothered. Hopefully the other wolf simply lost track of time with the books.

“Right.” Something flashes in Maverik’s eyes, but he turns to his horse and begins unpacking before I can catch what it was.

“We’re waiting for Greyson, right?” I look down at Kane standing beside the horse as he offers a hand to help me dismount.

“Of course.”

I narrow my eyes. I haven’t known these men for long, but I’ve seen the raw emotions behind Kane’s eyes. And I’ve seen what it looks like when he shutters them behind a wall.

He’s hiding something—they both are.

As soon as my feet hit the ground, a bone-deep weariness hits me like a wave. Kane unpacks the horses while Maverik, already having laid out the bedrolls, builds a fire. Mariette doesn’t seem concerned as she throws a bag over one shoulder and dismounts with one hand.

I stifle a yawn. As long as our lives aren’t in danger, Kane and Maverik can keep their secrets. I won’t bring myself to care until I’ve cleaned, eaten, and maybe even had a nap—those bedrolls look more comfortable than sleeping on the ground has any right to look.

Once Maverik starts the fire, Kane takes over tending to it.

“Why didn’t you start it with your dragon fire?” The question makes its way past my fatigue-addled faculties before I can stop it. He looks over, and I tilt my head as if I’d meant to ask.

Maverik flashes me and Mariette a bright smile, spreading his arms. “How about a wash? I know just the place.”

I hum. The wolf is trying to distract us by ushering us from the campsite, but the thought of finally feeling clean takes precedence, so we

let him guide us from the crackle of fire and toward the sound of water.

Still in the thick of the woods, we don't walk far until we hear a stream's trickle. Once the rushing water is in view, Mariette forces Maverik to stand behind a tree and turn. He acquiesces, but draws the line at wearing a blindfold.

"You can trust me. I won't peek." The dimples on both his cheeks tell a different story.

"I trust you as far as I can throw you," Mariette grumbles, both hands firmly on his shoulders and shoving him against the tree trunk.

Maverik's silver-grey eyes stay on the panther shifter, his grin widening. "You seem pretty strong. I bet you can throw me quite far."

"Not as far as you hope," she says without a flicker of a smile. She gives him another shove. He allows his back to collide harshly against the wood. "Stay."

"Don't take too long," he says in a singsong voice as we scurry past him and toward the water.

With the wolf too close and the stream too small to submerge ourselves properly, Mariette and I are done before Maverik has a chance to even think about risking a peek.

He winks as he takes his turn too, grumbling at how quickly we finish, but when the smell of hot food wafts toward us on our way back, he suddenly doesn't seem so disappointed the stream's visit is so short. Mariette pushes him aside as he laughs, and my own laughter joins his when he tries to take her hand.

My heart lifts further at the sight of Greyson sitting by the fire as he rotates a stick against the flames. "You're back!"

The wolf shifter smiles warmly, and happiness bubbles in my chest. I suddenly can't remember why I was so worried. The Three are more than cousins and childhood friends and comrades in battle. They're family—the real kind. The kind that doesn't abandon each other.

I might not be one of them, but one day I'll belong somewhere. With someone. Until then, I can bask in the glow of knowing such strong bonds do exist.

"Could you sound any happier?" Kane rumbles, pushing into my hand a stick with a piece of meat skewered at the end.

"I can certainly try," I chirp, taking the stick and settling onto the log as chatter grows around me. Despite the rising sun, it isn't so hot that the fire's

warmth is too much. In fact, it feels just right.

Everything feels just right.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

I’m dreaming.

I’m pretty sure I’m dreaming.

But I can’t tell where I am or who I’m with. It’s peaceful, though. I’m more at peace than I have been in a long time, and it’s not because I’m with my family; I know these people aren’t my family, even though I can’t see their faces.

The warmth is nice—comforting, even—and I breathe it in as it spreads through me.

But it gets hotter. And hotter. And hotter.

It burns.

I’m screaming.

No—someone else is screaming.

I jolt awake to the sounds of screaming.

My breath hitches.

Sitting up and pushing the covers off my body, I blink against the brightness and curse my lack of weaponry; they said they’d arm me. I will my eyes to adjust, but shadows writhe and curl in my vision every way I turn, casting darkness even when I know there should be none.

Something shuffles to my left, and I let out a breath of relief.

Mariette.

“What was that?” I whisper.

Her green eyes blink up at me slowly. She shakes her head once, looking as if she’s just woken as well.

A muffled sound barely makes it through the woods. A shout, I think.

Mariette sits up, one hand flung over her bedroll as she looks around.

Greyson and Maverik both sit by the fire, talking quietly to each other. Neither seem to have heard the screams—but how is that possible?

"Don't you hear that?" I whisper.

They pause and turn to us. The sun paints them gold, but its rays don't touch the shadows in their eyes.

"Hear what?" Maverik cocks his head as if listening.

Greyson blinks at what I am sure is another scream. One that's cut short.

"Hear *that*," I hiss, scrambling to rise.

The wolves stand as well; I don't miss the way they angle their bodies toward me. It's a familiar stance from my days in The Cage. Studying the opponent. Waiting. Watching.

"Mariette—"

I stop mid-turn. Not because she's already next to me, but because of her expression. The haunted look in her eyes cuts my breaths in half. What does she know? What are they not telling me?

Another scream. This time, it's unmistakable.

"We have to help." I kick the bedroll aside and grab my still-damp vest with one hand, slipping it on while clutching my jacket with the other. "Someone, give me a dagger. A knife. Something."

No one moves as I knot the ties of my vest. "You have so many! You won't miss just one."

Still, no one responds. I pause and look up.

Maybe the extra layer was a mistake; my neck warms as my body heats with an emotion I can't explain as I watch the three shifters stand motionless before me.

"What are you guys standing there for?"

Mariette winces when another shout rings in the air. Greyson and Maverik don't move. I wave my hands, unable to put into words my bewilderment at their silence.

"Fine," I say, turning on my heels. "I'll figure something out."

"No." Maverik steps in front of me. Gone is the friendly shifter who joked about peeking as we bathed in the stream. In his place is one third of the King's Three, steel-silver eyes trying to pin me in place.

Too bad only golden ones succeed in that endeavour.

"You guys might be okay with letting that—whatever that is—happen, but I'm not." I meet Maverik's distant gaze with a straight back. "I'm going to help."

“You can’t help.” Maverik’s strong hand wraps around my arm, holding me in a way his sombre expression couldn’t. “Go back to bed. You need rest.”

I let my lips curl as I glare up at him. “How about you go to sleep, since you won’t do anything?”

Something flashes in Maverik’s eyes as his fingers tighten on my arm. Not anger nor irritation, but something…else. Something I don’t understand. But I don’t have time to figure it out. Not when another cry gets cut short, and no one else seems willing to help.

“Release me,” I hiss. I avert my gaze from Mariette to keep my disappointment to myself. She only just got her shifter abilities back; if I try hard enough, I can understand her reluctance to disobey their direct orders. Me, though? I can’t be silenced—not by stones, and not by mysterious wolves who won’t explain themselves.

“It’s for the best.” Greyson moves to stand by his cousin, watching Mariette from the corners of his eyes. “There are things better left alone.”

I wrench my arm from Maverik, only getting it back because he releases me. A fact I’m painfully aware of as I look between the three shifters.

Mariette’s breathing has shortened, and she looks as if she might hurl even with her eyes locked on the ground in front of her feet. Her lower lip wobbles at the sound of a loud crack—like a tree snapping in half.

No one looks happy, but no one is doing anything about it. Nausea rolls in my gut as I finally acknowledge what I’ve been ignoring.

Kane isn’t here.

Understanding hits me like a punch in the face.

“You took prisoners, didn’t you?” My head rings as I whisper the words. The ground feels as if it’s been ripped from beneath my feet, but I don’t fall. Instead, I have the strange sensation of floating as I look into each of their eyes.

Silver. Silver. Green.

I tremble.

I can’t let him do this.

Whether they’re Rebels doesn’t matter—shouldn’t matter. They’re people. They’re *his* people. He may not be the king, but he acts on the king’s behalf, and he protects as much as he destroys.

I take a shuddering gasp and press a hand to my stomach, letting my eyes drop to the ground. I count the blades of bent grass at my feet until my

breathing evens.

Then I run.

I sprint toward the screams—toward Kane—and will my feet to go faster, *farther.*

But I'm not fast enough.

Even as I tear through the campsite, I barely make it halfway there. To him. To them.

I let out my own wretched shrieks as two pairs of hands yank me back right before I collide with Greyson's chest.

"No!" I yell. "Let me go!"

"Shut up," Maverik hisses between gritted teeth. "You'll get his attention."

That's exactly what I want. Let him come to me.

It's my fault, after all. It's my blood he wants.

Let me be the one to distract him.

Let me give them a chance to escape.

I scream and scream and scream as images flash in my mind, each brighter and more horrid than the last. Images of him drinking from Shelley. Images of him ripping people apart.

When Maverik covers my mouth with his hand, I scream into his palm.

Flailing and kicking, my body heats with flames of shame.

I'm the one driving his dragon mad. I'm the one fueling his dragon's bloodthirst.

Rebels or not, those people are there because of me.

And that's exactly what—who—they are. People.

All because I want my freedom.

"Stop." Mariette's wavering voice reaches me through the fog of grief clouding my mind. "Please."

I turn sharply to my friend; her crumpled face matches the words she whispers.

"Please, Scarlet." She takes a shuddering breath, blinking away unshed tears. "Please. Just…stop."

"Why?" I rasp. "Why won't you help?"

Her mouth opens, but only silence fills the space between us. Her hand, clutched tightly on my arm, trembles.

"You don't understand." Mariette inhales sharply. "You don't…You're not a shifter."

I look away, biting my lip to hold back the pain.

"It's not an insult," Greyson says gently. I stare at his black armour, tracing the bumps and ridges with my eyes as I push aside every instance anyone has ever said those exact words to me with the intent to offend. To mock. To ridicule.

"It's not," Mariette whispers. "It's a fact. Because you aren't a shifter, you don't know what it's like to have a shift in your head—someone who's part of you but also not. A shift you work with, whom you live with. An extension of you who also has their own desires. A part of you, yet their own. And without them, you're not whole. You're one and the same, yet different."

She takes a deep breath, then lifts her watery gaze to mine. "If you bond with your shift, you're more likely to have control and more likely to live in harmony together. Their desires become your desires, and yours become theirs. But if you aren't bonded, you're constantly fighting."

I swallow, knowing what she's about to say but unable to look away.

Mariette points to her temple. "In here."

She lowers the hand and presses it to her heart. "And in here."

"My panther and I live well together." Her sad tone doesn't match her words as she glances toward the trees where the Rebels still scream. "But even we struggle. And from what I've heard, he and his dragon…They're unbonded. I don't know how they've survived for so long, but it can't be easy."

Mariette shakes her head slowly. "The constant struggle. The constant fighting. Especially when your dragon wants…*that*. Most unbonded don't even make it to adulthood. It's a wonder he hasn't lost his mind."

I tear my gaze from my friend and look at the wolves listening quietly to Mariette. Their melancholic eyes say things their voices don't—things their voices won't.

"I know it doesn't feel right. And it's not." Mariette shakes, trembling all over as she swallows twice. "But I can at least…understand. And if we let you go, you're only endangering yourself. You don't know what state he's in right now."

"I'm not—I'm not bleeding." I can't stop my voice from cracking. "I'll be okay. He won't lose control."

Wrenching myself from their grip, I check my arms, pat my sides, and pull up my pant legs to show them, feeling more frantic with each

movement. As though proving my lack of injuries might change the truth of what's happening even as we speak.

"You don't know that he hasn't already," she whispers, twisting her hands together.

"What?" I gasp.

Greyson clears his throat and looks away. "Every time he uses his dragon's powers, it costs him. And with you being here—just your presence—it's hard on him. Harder than usual."

I pause. That's why Kane didn't start the fire; he must have already been at the very edge of control. Something snaps loudly. My eyes heat, my vision blurring with unshed tears as I bite my lip. That's why they won't help.

They either help Rebel prisoners at their cousin's expense, or they help Kane by staying away.

But I'm not them.

A surge of heat and ice flood my veins. I inhale a slow breath, recognizing the sensation. No one else seems to notice what's about to happen.

I let the warmth wash over me. I let it collide with the cold. I steady my breathing as they mix.

And then I transform.

The flurry of shouts and tangle of outstretched arms fly over me as I shrink.

Prepared for the change this time, I land on my four paws.

And sprint toward the sounds of agony.

I focus on my breathing, my heart pumping painfully in my chest as a small part of my mind wonders if my stamina might be that of a cat's or that of the endurance I'd built as a human. But the ache blossoming in my chest is not the type that comes from running; it's from fear of what I might find. Though I don't have enhanced hearing or sight, I'm thankful for the feline instincts that seem to come naturally with this form—my tail moves on its own to maintain balance as I race through the woods, hopping over branches and rocks without breaking stride.

When I finally burst through the bushes to emerge into a clearing, I choke on my breath, barely catching myself as I stumble.

Even without heightened senses, the metallic tang of blood permeates the air, thick enough to taste on my tongue.

Kane stands in the middle of what can only be described as a field of devastation. The unconscious woman in front of him stays upright only by the arm wrapped around her waist and his hand tilting her head to the side.

No, not unconscious.

Dead.

His face, hidden beneath his dark hair, presses into the woman's neck as her empty, unseeing eyes stare into nothingness. Crimson blood flows from her skin as he drinks.

Scattered around them are the broken bodies of countless others, each limp and motionless. Each with necks stained red.

There is no one left. No one left to help. No one left to save.

An eternity passes before Kane lifts his face, tilting it toward the sun, mouth slightly open and revealing elongated fangs dripping with blood.

At first glance, I might have assumed his expression was one of elation. But it's not. He closes his eyes at the sky, hands releasing the woman from his clutches, shoulders drooping in resignation.

Her body hits the ground with a thump that doesn't reach my ears. I can't take my eyes off that crimson-stained mouth.

I can't breathe.

The sight crushes my chest, tightening around my heart.

Am I to feel sorrow for the grief splashed across his face?

Am I to wish him well at the cost of others?

Am I to mourn what he loses each time he succumbs to his dragon's thirst for blood?

I don't know if I can.

He steals the breath I don't have when his golden eyes turn down, immediately locking on my small form.

I want to run—I want to run and hide and never set my eyes on this horrific monster ever again.

But this is my fault, too.

I'm as responsible as he is for the bodies lying at his feet.

Kane's face twists into that familiar expression of hate. The one that haunts my nightmares. The one I thought—foolishly—I wouldn't see again so soon.

"What is *she* doing here?" He snarls, deep and throaty and angry.

She who? I look around until I notice three sets of shadows on the ground.

Stuck in my guilt-ridden world of panic and dismay, I finally see he's turned those amber eyes up; instead of asking me, he's addressing the others in our party.

"Get her out of here!" Kane roars.

"She transformed and slipped away," Greyson answers calmly, hands up and palms facing his cousin. Jerking his chin without taking his eyes off Kane, he says, "Maverik."

The fair-haired shifter nods and crouches, picking me up before I can dart out of his reach.

I yowl, unsheathing my claws.

Maverik grunts and adjusts his hold so I can't scratch the bare skin of his hands. Even when I reach for his arms, my claws are no match for the material of his sleeves.

"Let's go." Greyson turns. Mariette follows, but Maverik hesitates.

Mere moments ago, I'd wanted to leave and never look back. Now that the choice has been made for me, I don't want to go.

I want to stay. I need to hear it. I need to know.

But this skies-damned cat mouth can't form the words I need to say, and no amount of hissing or kicking or claws will make them hear me.

So I pause and take a long breath.

I go to that place I've come to recognize as where the fire and ice originate every time I transform. That place of contrast deep within, from which balance forms.

As I had hoped, the sensation washes over me, and light bursts even through my closed eyes.

My perception is thrown off for a moment when my feet—my human feet—don't touch the ground. A deep shout of surprise. The jarring sense of falling.

I recover before the others, untangling myself from Maverik and jumping to my feet.

"I'm not leaving," I declare. "I need to know what's going on. Why this keeps happening."

"It's not something you need to know more about." Greyson steps forward, hand in the air. I retreat until I'm out of reach.

Mariette watches the exchange with sorrow, but I can't tell if it's for the King's Justice or for me.

“I just need to know,” I repeat, letting desperation creep into my voice. “Even if I can’t do anything about it, at least let me know.”

Maverik rises and dusts himself off as he meets my gaze. I will every ounce of steel in my body to show through my eyes. I want to know—I have to.

The need swirls in my chest, thrumming in my veins with each beat of my heart. I can’t fully explain it, even to myself, why I have to hear the truth of what’s happening. The truth of my involvement, my blame, my part in this.

“You’re going to keep trying, aren’t you?” He’s more serious than I’ve ever seen. I think he understands the guilt coursing through my veins. The shame of not having stopped the massacre, even if I couldn’t have done anything. The desire, at least, to fully understand the depths of the consequences of choosing myself.

Because that’s what I’m doing, aren’t I?

Despite knowing the effect of my presence, despite knowing my proximity to Kane increases his risk to everyone around him, I have no desire to leave. I have no urge to walk away from the Three and return to the dungeons.

I won’t stand by and do nothing, but I’m also not willing to trade my chance at a pardon.

I still want to see this through and earn my freedom.

I still long for my life.

Maverik understands.

I turn from silver eyes to golden ones. I watch as Kane’s jaw works, as his fists clench and unclench.

I release my breath when the King’s Justice nods.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-NINE

“Are you sure?” Greyson glances between me and his cousin, shifting weight from one foot to the other. Maverik takes Mariette by the shoulders even as she shakes her head fervently.

“Let’s go.” He drags them with him, walking into the woods with the panther in tow. Greyson gives me one last look. One last warning.

Whether he’s warning me against what I’m about to find out or warning me to be careful around his cousin, I still both my mind and my breathing. I’m staying.

In a matter of moments, our companions’ shuffling fades, muted by the thickness of the woods, and I’m left alone with the King’s Justice and the bodies he’s drained.

Neither of us speaks.

My fingers find the bottom of my vest from where it sticks out beneath my jacket, twisting the ends of the thick material.

Kane tears his gaze from mine, looking at the wreckage around him.

“I guess we should find somewhere else to talk.”

“We can talk here,” I say at the same time.

His chest rises with his deep breath as he nods. Kane gestures at nothing in particular, saying, “Do you want to sit or—”

“We can stand.” My words come out breathy and demanding, yet he’s not angry at all. All the hatred and contempt from earlier appears to have melted away, as if he’s too tired for even that.

I will myself to stay quiet even through the tense silence.

He drags a bloody hand through his hair, eyes turned to the spot from which his cousins disappeared. “I’m sure they’ve told you some things.”

I dip my head.

“But you want to know more.”

I bite back a snarky response. He doesn’t owe me an explanation—none of them do—but he’s willing to try. So I’m willing to behave.

Even if my simmering anxiety wants to wield aggression as a means of protecting myself.

He nods slowly, eyes flickering from one tree to another, never staying in one spot for long and never landing on me.

Kane lifts a hand to the high neck of his shirt and pulls it down, revealing the strip of black leather around his neck—and the dull gems embedded in it. With one finger, he adjusts the collar. He does so several times, and I realize it must be a nervous habit—which means *he’s* nervous.

The King’s Justice, the powerful shifter, the infamous dragon.

Nervous about talking to *me*.

My heart skips and sputters, tumbling over itself as my resolve weakens.

“When I was young…” He chuckles, shaking his head and dragging a hand through his hair. “Look at me. Starting my dumb story with my childhood trauma.”

I shrug, feigning nonchalance. “Everyone starts somewhere.”

The smile he gives doesn’t reach his eyes, but it needles a hairline crack in my heart.

“Unlike other shifters, dragons are identifiable from birth. Our eyes give it away. We’re powerful, but unstable. So when my uncle saw what I was, he kept me in the dungeons for…oh, about fifty years.” He taps his fingers against his thigh, head tilted and lost in his thoughts. “I must have had a maid as a babe, but my first true memories are of them.”

He jerks his chin in the direction his cousins had gone. I swallow my questions to avoid interrupting him.

Fifty years? From birth?

Greyson and Maverik are his first real memories?

“They were just children themselves, barely able to stumble away from their guardians, but once they figured out how to, they visited me all the time.” Kane smiles softly, seeing into the past—seeing things I’ll never know. “They brought me things. Things I’d never seen before, you know? Little things like twigs and rocks and stuff. They kept me going.”

My heart clenches as my mind conjures miniature versions of two silver-haired boys reaching through bars to share their findings with a tiny version of Kane.

“Once, the fools even brought a small tree. What a shock that was to discover how big trees *really* get.” He chuckles like it’s funny. I swallow a gasp as my throat tightens at the image of small hands grabbing curiously at his cousins.

My face heats at the thought of little golden eyes, bright against the darkness of a dungeon cell.

“I guess I’m starting with this because I want you to know I mean it when I say I understand.” He shrugs, turning his face toward the sky, one hand pulling at the leather collar. “I understand your desire for freedom. I understand your desire to own your life.”

He runs a thumb over one of the silence stones. “I spent fifty years by myself in the darkness where my only light was when those two idiots came to visit. As they got older—as we got older—the time between those visits became more terrifying as I grew to understand why they came by less often.”

I grab my elbow with my other hand just for something to do, unable to tear my eyes from the King’s Justice. From Kane. From hearing words my heart knows are being spoken for the first time.

“As they got older, and consequently stronger, they were sent out on assignments. Taking care of the king’s enemies. Squashing signs of rebellion.” He waves a hand in the air as if those tasks were nothing. “I hated Uncle for forcing them into dangerous situations. As powerful as we all are, we were still just kids. They were inexperienced. Unprotected. It was almost like he wanted to risk their lives just to show he could.”

A breeze wends its way through the woods, rustling leaves and lifting the clothes of the dead. The idea the King’s Three had ever been anything less than what they are now would have been laughable if it weren’t for the shadows in his eyes.

“He came to me with this collar many times, you know?” Kane absentmindedly fingers the leather at his neck. “He offered to let me out of that cell if only I would put this on and work for him. I refused him each time.”

I bite my lip. I didn’t know he’d refused. I didn’t know it’d been an option at all; it sounded like his chance to finally leave the dungeon.

“I saw how he treated my cousins. How he used them.” Kane’s lip curls, the heat of anger returning to his eyes as he looks into memories I can’t see. “How he didn’t care for them the way he should have. So when he first explained the magic of this collar, I knew it was too good to be true. I knew he’d hidden the caveats behind walls of deception he’d built brick by lying brick.”

Keeping a finger looped through the leather, he looks from one body to the next, gaze lingering long enough I know he’s thinking about their lives. The lives lost. The lives he’s taken. The lives he will take.

“He told me it would curb my dragon’s cravings. That the cravings was a curse placed upon all dragon shifters for some sin the dragons committed long ago—that while he couldn’t break the curse, he could temper it and finally allow me to shift.”

I tilted my head in confusion and horror. Have I heard of a curse on dragon shifters? He notices my expression and smiles sadly.

“I couldn’t shift, you see? That’s what the curse does. Dragon shifters are cursed so we can’t shift or access our dragon’s powers without the blood of other shifters.” He releases my gaze, but my heart continues racing as pieces of the awful puzzle finally slot into place. “That’s why dragons are so unstable. Our bodies demand the shift, and our dragons know that connection comes from the blood of shifters.”

I shake my head, but no words rise to my tongue as I listen and watch the most powerful shifter share his tragic tale.

“Those who give in to the cravings can shift, but each time we shift, each time we tap into our dragon’s abilities, blood is required to bridge the gap and fuel that magic. Eventually, the dragon doesn’t want to change back. Eventually, the dragon takes over.”

As if he senses the question I can’t bring myself to ask, he shakes his head. “Those who don’t give in pay the price with their sanity. A lifetime of fighting with your dragon—of fighting a part of yourself, your own mind—takes its toll. Eventually, the inevitable happens. You lose your mind or you lose your will to live. In the end, you give in to your dragon’s thirst just to silence it all.”

“You didn’t shift for fifty years?” I finally whisper.

Kane throws his head back and laughs. “For fifty years, I held my dragon in check. He was not pleased. He craved blood—nearly went mad and took me with him just weeks after my first shift should have happened.

But Greyson and Maverik are good cousins. Better friends.” He exhales, voice trembling slightly as he adds, “Best of brothers.”

“Did you…”

He nods slowly. “I declined those first weeks after I should have shifted the first time, when his cravings grew tenfold. But they saw what was happening to me. I don’t think Uncle knew, but they’d cut their own arms and press a rag to it. Not a lot. Not so much that I could shift or even access any powers. A few drops quieted him enough to tolerate his thirst, especially because I was alone and behind bars. That’s how it went for decades, even after Uncle tried to trick me with this thing.”

“I would have stayed strong against the king. I wouldn’t have accepted his offer. I knew there was a truth he wouldn’t say. A consequence to accepting his so-called gift. He said the collar would curb my cravings—make it so I could shift with the tiniest sips of blood. Wouldn’t hurt anyone, he’d said.” Kane laughs bitterly, the sound slicing my heart with the jagged edges of his pain. “But then Maverik nearly died.”

I can’t help my gasp. My legs quake; maybe we should have taken a seat after all.

Kane’s amber eyes find me, the darkness there chilling my very soul. “He’d sent them on some ridiculous assignment. It was just the two of them against hoards of…” He shakes his head, a noise of anger rising from the back of his throat. “They had no chance. It was a miracle they survived with only the injuries they’d sustained. They didn’t want to tell me, but Greyson feared—truly feared—Maverik wouldn’t live through the night, and he remembered having read some tiny footnote in some long-forgotten book about the blood of dragon shifters having healing properties. Something about keeping their victims alive for longer to drain more blood.”

A strangled noise escapes me. He doesn’t seem to hear.

“So when healing potions weren’t enough, Greyson dragged Mav’s half-dead body to me. I was more than happy to give my blood. I’d have given him all of it if it would have saved him. Fortunately, as big as he is, he didn’t need that much. Grey and his books, right?” Kane exhales and smiles. “We never told anyone of what happened that night.” His amber eyes find mine, but there’s no ill-will or disgust in his gaze. Only raw vulnerability. A plea to keep their secret.

I nod, not trusting myself to say anything more than a croak.

“After that, I decided nothing was worth letting my brothers continue risking their lives out there. Not without me.” He crosses his arms as if needing more than just armour to protect himself from my judgement. “So I finally said yes.”

I swallow thickly, choking down my heart’s protests against something my mind knows has already happened.

“The magic imbued into the stones quiets my dragon, yes. But it also keeps him at a farther distance, making it even more difficult to feel him. Bonding would have been difficult before, but it’s impossible now. When I’m around my uncle, I feel the leash he holds over my dragon—over me.” Kane’s nose wrinkles, reminding me of the wolves’ snouts, as if he’s smelled something unpleasant. “Something about this thing”—he tugs the collar again—“makes it so when I shift in the king’s presence, I lose consciousness. My dragon takes over…and I think my uncle takes control of him.”

A chill races up my spine, and my skin prickles at the very idea of someone taking control of my body—of me—without my knowledge or consent.

“The collar weakens around the new moon.” Kane glances up at the bright sky, to where I know night will later reveal a mere sliver, if any at all. “That’s when my dragon is loudest. Usually, we just ride it out if we don’t have any…volunteers. The guys keep him in check if I can’t hold him back and I shift. But lately, it’s a little harder.”

He gives me a wry smile, dragging his fingers through his hair. “A little more temptation these days.”

I press a hand to my chest, but it does nothing to quiet my racing heart. I was right. All of this—all of them—it’s my fault.

And he’s suffering because of me.

He might need me to get past silence domes, but nothing is worth that pain in his eyes. The pain he finally allows past his walls. The pain he finally shares with me.

“All of this is just a very long-winded way of explaining why I drink the blood of the worst of the worst. Why I’m surrounded by dead bodies. Why, even though they aren’t the type of people I usually feed my dragon, I made the choice I did.” He sighs heavily, slipping his hands into his pants pockets. “The closer we get to the new moon, the more frenzied he

becomes. I need to keep him sated, or I'll shift against my will and lose another part of myself."

I bite my lip. This is so much worse than I could have ever imagined. But there's still something he's holding back. Something he doesn't want to tell me.

When he meets my eye, he almost shrinks into himself—as much as a man as large and powerful as the King's Justice can.

"And…I might lose you."

I inhale sharply, my heart beating to the rhythm of his pain. "What is it about my blood?"

"I don't know." Kane shrugs, shoulders drooping in defeat. "I wish I knew. I really do. But my dragon wants your blood more than he's ever wanted anything else. Anyone else. We might not be bonded, but I feel his desire for you as clearly as I feel the warmth of the sun against my skin."

He mumbles something under his breath.

"What was that?" I ask wryly. Can I really handle more? I'm the one who wanted the truth, but I had no idea just how much there was. Just how much he'd share.

"I said…" He inhales deeply, then puffs both cheeks as he breathes out. "I said you smell like peace. Quiet. Balance. You smell like home. And he wants it so badly."

My brows rise. My jaw drops.

My neck flushes with heat.

"I smell like…" I can't even finish the sentence. We've been intimate, yet this—*this*—is what makes me lose all sense of reality?

Kane steps toward me, gentle amber eyes studying my face. His throat bobs.

"Like peace during the year's first snowfall. Like the quiet of solitude but without the loneliness. Like my first ever breath of fresh air. Like…" He takes a shuddering breath as he looks me right in the eye. Willing me to understand. The intensity of his golden gaze nearly burns. Instead of looking through me, it's like he's trying to do the opposite; he wants to bare his entire soul to me, and he wants me to see it. To see it all. To see him.

It's almost too much as I dance on the precipice of falling into him.

I don't even tell my feet to do so—I simply step closer.

"You smell like the moment right when I blink awake from a dreamless sleep, but my mind hasn't caught up to my body just yet. That quiet, split-

second before I remember. Before I remember where I am and what I do. Before I remember I'm the monster everyone rightfully fears."

We keep walking to each other. I wouldn't have been able to stop myself even if I'd wanted to; I'm drawn to him by an invisible tether just as he seems called to me.

My hands press against his chest. His arm wraps around my lower back, tightening and pulling me closer even when there's no space between our bodies. His thumb and forefinger on my chin guide my face up. He drops his forehead against mine, warm breath brushing my cheeks, shuddering as if struggling to breathe just because I'm in his presence.

Kane closes his eyes. His throat bobs as he swallows.

"You smell like what I think—what I *wish* and *pray*—the peace of bonding with my dragon might feel like." He lets out another even breath, his entire body shaking beneath my palms. The hand on my face opens to cup my entire cheek, holding me as if I'm precious. As if I might disappear if he lets go.

"He wants that," Kane mumbles. "We want that."

For one second, for one heartbeat, I want to give it to him. I want him to have everything he describes. I want him to know peace.

Before I can change my mind, the words claw their way out of my throat.

"Drink from me," I rasp.

He tenses. His fingers freeze against my cheek.

I squeeze my eyes shut because I don't know what I'll do if I see disgust in his eyes; if he shared everything his dragon wants with no intention of following through because *he* doesn't want the same thing.

Doesn't want me.

"I can't trust myself to stop." The pain in his voice wraps sharp chains around my heart, each link tightening little knives deeper into my soul. "I'm afraid…I don't want…"

"No," I say firmly, lifting my palms from his chest to hold the back of his neck, pulling him closer to me as I whisper the words that should have felt so wrong. "No. I trust you. I know you won't hurt me."

He lifts his forehead from mine, and I immediately miss the contact. But the loss of warmth is replaced by the heat of his golden eyes as he gazes down at me with what I can only describe as tortured wonder—a reverence I've done nothing to deserve.

“What if I do?” His face crumples with the mere thought of hurting me, and it’s that exact look which makes me sure.

“You won’t.” I might regret it later; I might wish I’d never shared this part of myself with him. But in this moment, I know with all my heart he needs this, and I’m the only one who can give it to him.

He nods. The movement is jerky, nearly hitting my head with his.

Then he bends, sweeping an arm under my legs while the other wraps around my back, pulling me to his chest.

“I’m not doing this to you here, like this,” he says gruffly. “And this way, you get the chance to change your mind.”

Kane keeps his eyes trained forward as he walks us away from the wreckage—his wreckage. He truly thinks I’ll change my mind, and I believe he won’t force it if I tell him so, but I won’t. The look of his pain is ingrained in my mind, and it’s forever changed my perception of the King’s Justice.

What I once thought as an insatiable desire for blood is a necessity brought about by a curse over which he has no control.

I thought he enjoyed being the King’s Justice—that he wanted it and thrived in it.

But it’s not true.

Kane acts the part of the Justice as much as I had acted the part of Spencer’s fighter. He wants this life as little as I’d wanted mine.

I tuck myself against his chest, and his arms tighten around my body, pressing me closer to him. I’ve always been vaguely aware of our size difference, but curled up against him like this, I’ve never felt smaller. Nor have I ever felt safer.

Despite what he’s about to do.

“This seems…sufficient.” He stops, releasing me with gentle reluctance.

He’s taken us to an area where the woods are thick enough that I can’t see past the trees or the underbrush. Where we’re sequestered and can pretend we’re protected behind a veil of privacy instead of hidden by foliage.

Kane wraps his large hand over my much smaller one and guides me to a boulder with a jut softened by thick moss. He tilts his head, and I take a seat.

He doesn’t let go of my hand.

Instead, he sits next to me and takes his time undoing the strings of my vest, slowly sliding it over my shoulders and down my arms. He drops it on the ground and threads his fingers through mine, playing with each of them between his hands. After a moment of silence where my breathing sounds far louder than it should, he meets my eyes, dropping our hands into his lap.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I know.”

“You don’t owe me this.”

“I know.”

“You shouldn’t trust me.”

“I do.”

I will my eyes to show every ounce of acceptance I feel. I want him to understand I saw what he wanted to show me; I know the risk I’m taking. I’m not changing my mind.

“So, will it hurt?” My weak smile doesn’t inspire confidence, even when I gesticulate to lighten the mood.

“Yes,” he answers carefully, eyeing me for a reaction. “It will for the first bit. Then you’ll drift into numbness. Or a type of nothingness. So I’ve been told.”

I nod, pursing my lips. “As long as I know what to expect.”

He continues staring quietly until I can’t take the silence any longer.

“And how does this work?” I laugh, but it’s a bit too high, so I settle down and try another smile.

Kane sighs heavily, dragging a hand through his hair; he doesn’t even try to hide the conflict warring behind his eyes.

He slips his hand up mine until my wrist rests in his palm. Then he turns my arm with an achingly slow gentleness, looking down as he drags a finger over the skin. “We can do it here.”

I imagine pressing my wrist to his mouth and what it would feel like before his fangs pierce my skin. Would he watch as he drinks from me? Or would he dip his head down so I can’t see his face?

“Or we can do it here.” Leaving my wrist clasped in his hand, he lifts the other to brush my hair from my neck, his touch featherlight over the sensitive skin of my throat.

I shiver as my mind conjures images of Kane’s lips pressing where his fingertips caress, swallowing thickly at the thought of his fangs elongating and sinking into me.

“…Or you can still stop this,” he whispers. “Your choice.”

“Do it here.” I lean into his hand, letting my throat rest against his palm. I don’t know if I’m brave enough to watch.

He inhales sharply, eyes dropping to my lips, then to where his weightless touch sears the blood beneath my skin.

“Are you certain?” Desire darkens his gaze, his lids already half closed even as he mumbles the question. “Truly certain?”

There is no way he doesn’t hear my pounding heart, but I nod.

He dips his head, presses his face into my hair, and breathes like he’s filling his lungs with me. His fingers flex against my throat while the other hand rises to cup my cheek as he softly nudges me, tilting my head into his palm and exposing my neck to him.

“Let me hear you say it,” he murmurs. His hot breath sends prickles of danger dancing all over my skin, but the excitement makes my toes curl deliciously. “Say it.”

“I’m certain,” I rasp. “Yes. Drink from me.”

A low rumble vibrates his chest, and I feel it all the way to my fluttering heart. His breathing turns heavy, but he keeps it controlled as his nose traces the side of my face down to where his hand holds my exposed throat.

He inhales deeply; I don’t know if it’s for my benefit or for his.

I count my breaths as I wait.

One. Two. Three.

Four. Five. Six—

My eyes flutter closed, my mind emptying of rational thought when his lips press against my neck.

His other hand leaves the back of my head—I barely keep myself upright—to take both of mine in his, dropping them in his lap.

“Hold on to me,” he murmurs.

Shivers race up my spine, and I’m unable to bite back a gasp when his lips ghost across my skin.

When I don’t move, Kane threads his fingers through mine and flattens my hands over his thighs.

“Hold.”

The command almost makes me moan.

“I’m sorry for the pain,” he murmurs against my throat.

I don’t get the chance to tell him not to worry.

A sharp sting rips through the fog of anticipation as his fangs pierce my skin. I think I gasp, but maybe I let out a strangled garbling instead—I don't know, because agony joins the blood flowing in my veins, and my vision turns white as images of death slam into my mind. My fingers grip onto his muscled thighs, holding as if only he binds me to this world; as if only he can save me from succumbing to whatever poison threatens to consume me.

Just when I can't take any more, the pain subsides into a dull ache that throbs all over my body. But the ache doesn't hurt; it wends through me, leaving trails of pleasure. My skin turns sensitive instead of burning, and I'm acutely aware of Kane and everywhere he touches.

His hand at the back of my neck, keeping my head steady.

His fingers digging into my hip, holding me up.

My breaths lengthen.

I'm weightless. I'm floating. His arms are the only things tethering me, keeping me from flying away.

Warmth blankets my mind and body. Nothing worries me—in fact, what even is worry? Only happy things exist now. Joy and beauty and pleasure. One thousand silence stones is nothing; we'll get them in no time. Tonight, in fact. What was I so worried about?

Colours blend until they become one. That one colour, made up of all the other colours, swirls and swirls and swirls.

I drop my head against Kane's, rubbing my cheek against his soft hair. No need to worry. He's nuzzled me like this many times. It's my turn.

Skies, I hope he nuzzles me again.

He likes to smell me, too. I like it when he smells me. Maybe I should smell him back.

"You smell nice," I mumble. "You smell like…"

Another sting of pain jolts me out of my reverie.

I blink rapidly against the bright sun, gasping for air that drags me from my dreamlike state with each breath that fills my lungs.

But I'm not the only one breathing hard.

Kane drops his forehead against mine, panting as he clutches my face in both hands. His shadow blocks the light, and I blink again to adjust.

"Are you okay?" His wide eyes search mine before glancing all over my face, turning my head from side to side as he inspects me.

Kane curses. Brings his wrist to his mouth, rips into his skin, and holds the wound out to me as the other hand presses gently on the back of my

neck.

“Drink,” he commands, rough and frantic.

“Wait,” I say, head still swimming as I push his arm aside. “Just wait.”

“Drink.”

“I need a moment. Just to breathe.” I turn my face, but the hand at my neck tightens, holding me in place. “Let me breathe, okay? I promise I’m fine.”

“You’re still bleeding.”

I blink at his coarse voice and jagged, uneven breathing. The blatant fear he allows me to see. The tremor in both his hands.

Kane’s not trying to heal me for me, because I’m in pain. He needs to heal me…for himself. Because he’s the one who caused it.

Swallowing thickly, I nod. The pure relief on his face squeezes my heart, dulling the usual disgust at the thought of drinking his blood.

Or maybe it’s dulled now because he’s had mine.

He hisses as soon as my lips touch his skin.

I flinch and look up. “Did that hurt?”

His gold eyes, wide with shock, look from my mouth—where I can feel the cool spot of blood lingering on my lip—to his wrist and the crimson slightly smeared across his skin.

“N-no.” Kane clears his throat and shakes his head, tilting to look at my neck. “No. Keep going. It’s not quite healed.”

Ignoring his strange behaviour, I lift his arm and drink once more. His concern for me brushes aside what previously was an obscene sweet and metallic tang, making his blood more neutral—and maybe even fringing on pleasant.

When I feel the wound close entirely, I release him and lean back against the boulder. His hand has dropped from my neck to my knee, but his focus is on the wrist from which I just drank; he studies it with a furrowed brow. I watch as his skin repairs itself, my heart still hammering in my chest.

“How do you feel?” He eyes me warily, dragging a hand through his hair.

My cheeks flush as memories of euphoria flood my mind.

“You didn’t warn me it would feel so good,” I say, attempting a joke. But my voice is just as rough as his. I turn to hide my embarrassment, but not before I catch desire darkening his golden irises.

“No one has ever described it as…good.” He barely chokes out the last word.

In the corner of my eye, he drags a hand through his hair again, pushing the front pieces back as he exhales shakily. “Pain. Fear. Numbness. Nothing.” He shakes his head, messy locks sticking out in multiple directions. “Never…good.”

“Oh,” I whisper.

“Yeah,” he says. “Oh.”

“Something about this blood, right?” I laugh weakly, but maybe I should stop attempting jokes; the intensity of his gaze only increases as he nods slowly.

“Something about this blood,” he agrees.

My breath hitches when he sidles closer, brushing a strand of black hair from my face and tucking it behind my ear as his knuckles trace its curve, following it down to my jawline where he grips my chin between his thumb and forefinger.

“Are you really okay?”

“Um.” My tongue suddenly feels too big for my mouth. “Yes.”

“Good.”

He presses his mouth to mine.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY

Fire and light and electricity explode in my mind.

I gasp.

His tongue traces my bottom lip. I moan quietly. Receiving the permission he seeks, Kane slips into my mouth.

He takes his time exploring my mouth while his hands take their time exploring my body. I'm painfully aware of everywhere he touches. Painfully aware of the fabric of my clothes tugging along my skin. Painfully aware of how much he's still wearing.

I reach out for him, grabbing him by the shoulders and pulling him to me at the same time he yanks me to him. The force of our collision drags my top over my breasts, scraping against my already hard nipples.

Kane swallows my moan and bites my lip. The little jolt is quickly soothed by his tongue sliding over the stinging spot.

He kisses my lower lip. Kisses the corner of my mouth. Trails kisses up my jaw and to my neck.

When he presses his lips to where his fangs had been, his tongue flicks out, warm and wet, to lap at what I know is unmarred skin. Still, he takes his time soothing the healed wound, kissing and licking and sending heat flooding between my legs.

I dig my fingers into his hair and pull; I'm rewarded by a groan rumbling against my throat. He grips my hip tighter, his other hand teasing the bottom of my shirt and twisting the top of my pants.

He kisses and suckles the column of my throat, licking my fluttering pulse. I grab at his armour, trying to find any skin contact as he chuckles.

"You've come on my hand…" He nips me, and I yelp.

“You’ve come on my cock…” His tongue slides over the sore spot, and I moan.

“Now you’ll have to come on my mouth.” Kane slips out of my grasp, and I whimper at the loss.

In one motion, he pulls my pants down as he drops to kneel before me. With a hand on each of my knees, he pushes my legs apart. I gasp when the air hits the wetness between my legs. His nose flares; his eyes glaze with desire.

“Do you know how often I think about this?” His lips part slightly, as if he’s waited his whole life for this moment. “Do you know how long I’ve wanted to taste you?”

It’s so vulgar, but I can’t close my eyes.

I can’t stop looking at Kane as he looks at me.

At how wet I am for him.

He meets my eyes with a smirk. “I’m not waiting anymore.”

He holds my gaze as he lowers his head. As he lowers his mouth.

A groan escapes his lips before he even touches me.

But when his hot tongue reaches my slick entrance, he groans louder. The guttural sound echoes in my mind, twining with the thundering in my ears and my heavy, uneven panting.

Stars burst in my vision; I can barely keep them open as Kane licks the entirety of my slit. His hands trail up from my knees, slipping under my thighs to grip them from behind. He palms my flesh like he can’t get enough of touching me. Can’t get enough of me.

I gasp when he pushes me up by the thighs. My hands slap against the boulder to steady myself as my back slides up, the soft moss and hard rock creating a lip-biting sensation against my sensitive skin.

Without moving his mouth from my center, he lifts me higher, draping my legs over his shoulders and adjusting my body so he can have his way with me however he wants.

His hands grip me tight, holding me to him as his tongue licks at the spot between my legs, drinking insatiably before driving right into me like this is his sole reason for existence.

I dig both hands into his hair and hold on for balance. For dear life. Delicious heat builds deep in my core, my body tense and loose with pleasure as I try, and fail, to keep any semblance of a thought from slipping through my lust-soaked mind.

He groans. The deep-throated sound vibrates through me, bringing me back to the present. I open my eyes and am welcomed by his golden ones, watching me with an intensity that might have scared me if I weren't so lost in the sheer bliss of his tongue sweeping over my throbbing, aching centre.

I pant openly when he catches me looking, the smile obvious in his dark gaze. Nothing can cool the fires roaring through my blood except for him—him and his mouth and his tongue and his teeth—and he knows it.

A choked sound crawls out of my throat when his hand reaches up and under my shirt. He holds my sensitive nipple between two fingers as he palms my breast. The touch, the grabbing, the tongue—they go right to my head, to my core, to everywhere. I drop my head back against the boulder with a wanton moan. My hands tighten in his hair. He must enjoy the pain; his own growl joins mine, and I grind my desire against his face as his fingers twist my nipple.

His tongue goes lower, lower, lower until he presses it, hot and wet and coated with my lust, against the tight spot no one else has ever touched. I gasp. My back arches as I tremble and pant for reprieve when he drags his tongue back up the entirety of my entrance, lingering at the top—at the sensitive pearl there.

His tongue swirls around it before sucking it into his mouth. My mind empties, completely and utterly.

He stops palming my breast to squeeze it instead. His other hand slides up to my stomach, holding me in place as I cry out and writhe, desperate with pleasure, when he gently nips my bundle of nerves before licking it, lazily twirling the tip of his tongue.

Kane licks me all the way down before dragging his tongue back up. Then he pulls back just enough for his hot breath to ghost over my entrance. My hips arch toward him by instinct, but he holds me still.

"Skies, you're so wet for me." His smile turns feral. "Are you even less turned on this time?"

"N-no," I gasp. Then squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head. "Yes."

"Not turned on at all, then?" He cocks his head and locks eyes with me, humour and lust glazing that hot, heady gaze. "I guess I have to try harder."

His smirk widens.

I bite my lip hard, but even the pain doesn't clear the fog of pleasure smothering every single one of my thoughts.

I close my eyes and try again. "Not…"

Kane brushes his thumb against the sensitive spot between my thighs and thrusts a finger into me. I let out a strangled cry.

“Not…” I gasp when he withdraws and adds a second finger.

“Not at…”

His thumb presses down. My eyes roll back.

“Not turned on…at…”

Kane lifts his thumb only to replace it with his mouth. He sucks and nips and soothes and licks until I forget what I was saying.

Forget his teasing. Forget who we are.

I forget everything except the way he makes me feel as I ride his hands and his face, wanting more, more, more.

“Scarlet,” he growls against me. “I’ve been good, haven’t I?”

I mewl, because it’s the only thing I can do. The sound of my name, my proper name, on his lips when his mouth is between my legs nearly sends me over the edge.

“Then give me my reward,” he breathes. “Give me what I’ve been waiting for. What I’ve been dreaming of. Let me taste you as you come on my tongue, Scarlet.”

I whimper, barely breathing as my body tightens.

“Scarlet.” He says my name like a plea, his hand palming my breast.

“Scarlet.” He says my name like a prayer, his fingers pumping into me.

“Scarlet.” He says my name like a promise, his mouth drinking every drop.

His lips move against me as he whispers my name over and over, a vow he intends to keep. An oath he will never break. A dream finally answered.

Everything tightens, coiled and ready.

“Come for me,” Kane commands.

And I do.

Stars explode.

In my center. In my eyes. In my mind.

I ride his hands, his mouth, his tongue. I ride him through the waves of pleasure as he drinks every drop with groan after groan.

When I open my eyes, I’m breathless and panting, held up only by my back pressed against the boulder and my legs draped over his shoulders.

He slides his fingers out from my slick, aching core, and we both moan.

My breath catches in my throat when he meets my eyes, bringing both fingers into his mouth.

“Can’t waste a single drop.” His wicked smile adds to the fire already coursing through my veins.

I reach for him, wanting—needing—to feel him. But he gently sets my legs down and brings an arm under my knees. In one motion, he moves us and lays me onto the soft grass.

Again, I reach between us, grasping at his belt and sheathes, fingers desperate to remove at least some of his clothing as he had done with mine.

Desperate to feel him inside me once more.

His lips pull into a smirk. I’m not even mad, knowing what that mouth just did.

His deft hands take over and make quick work of his armour and his clothes as I toss my shirt aside.

I’d seen him once already, but the sight of him—all of him—like this takes my breath away, filling every thought with *him*.

He lays me down once more, following while I lie back and watch as he climbs over me, bracing his own weight. I reach between us and grip the hard, heavy evidence of his desire.

He drops his head, groaning and thrusting into my hand.

I want to hold him and make him see the stars he’d shown me, but I can’t wait. Not now.

And judging by his tight shoulders, he can’t, either.

I guide him to my entrance, and when his tip brushes against the wetness pooled between my legs, he lifts his head and meets my eyes with gritted teeth and barely restrained control.

Asking.

I release him with a nod. He doesn’t wait.

He plunges into me. My back arches. My hands claw at his shoulders.

He groans, sheathing himself in me. Filling me wholly. Reaching the end of me before withdrawing.

Kane brings his hand to the back of my head and fists my hair. The delicious pain makes me dizzy with pleasure as he enters me again, eyes watching the glisten of my lust coat his length while he pulls out.

His guttural, hoarse growls as he drives himself into me, over and over, make me hotter. Wetter. He fills me entirely, stretching me in a way I’ve never felt before him and fear I may never feel again.

He straightens. I gasp at the loss of heat.

Before I can protest, he pushes my knees together and drags me up by the hip, turning me until I'm on my hands and knees.

I look over my shoulder and am given another sight I will revisit for years to come.

"Skies," I whisper. Kane's hands splay across my backside, spreading me. He looks at my drenched slit with unfettered hunger before burying his face between my thighs.

I let out a strangled sound somewhere between a moan and a cry as his tongue drags over my entrance.

My eyes are still squeezed shut when he withdraws.

Without warning, he slams himself back into me.

Our groans mix into the most vulgar sounds this forest has ever heard.

He pounds into me relentlessly and with fervour, jerking my body to him even as I push back to meet each of his thrusts.

"Fuck," he says through gritted teeth. "*Fuck*."

An unintelligible sound leaves my own mouth between my panting and moaning as his hands tighten on my hips, sure to leave bruises.

I groan at the thought he might leave marks on my body and clench around him.

"*Fuuuuuck.*" He slows as I tighten, drawing out our pleasure before slamming deep into me.

Still wanting more, I push against him and moan when he reaches the end of me. I meet him thrust for thrust until he lets out a deep chuckle.

"Impatient?" He grabs my hips, forcing me to slow as he pulls out until only his tip remains.

I ignore his question, ignore the smirk I know he wears.

Kane hums as he sinks himself into me, slower this time. I rotate my hips, moving on him, trying to work him deeper into me.

He grunts, so I do it again.

His hand reaches around me and his fingers pinch my nipple.

I yelp at the sudden pain, but the sound turns into a moan as he palms my breast and squeezes it.

"Fair enough," he says roughly. "Next time, though, you'll have to use your words."

He pinches my nipple again before grabbing a fistful of my hair. With one hand yanking my head back and the other caressing the sensitive spot between my thighs, he unleashes himself.

Kane slams into me, over and over, ruthlessly pounding me as my breathy moans turn into cries of unadulterated pleasure, bringing me closer to the edge once more.

His fingers press against that sensitive spot, following every rotation of my hips even as I grind on him, wanting to take him with me, wanting to fall together.

Faster. Harder.

I'm barely holding it together. Barely remember wanting him to shatter for me as I had for him.

Each of his relentless thrusts sends another wave of pleasure through me and adds heat to my building tension. Threatens to undo me from within.

His fingers swirl between my legs. Lust coils at my core, and I clench around him, desperate to bring us both the release we need.

He snarls as if knowing I'm holding back—holding back until he goes first.

"I've…I've been good," I pant, eyes fluttering. "I want…"

"Good girls come first." He pinches me, and I fall apart for the second time.

He releases my hair and takes both my hips, pulling me back and slamming me to him as he thrusts faster, harder, deeper. He's feral as he drives into me, unrelenting in drawing out my pleasure as he chases his own.

In my bliss-filled haze, I clench around him and match each of his frenzied thrusts, listening to his uneven, breathy groans as his pounding turns jerky and his fingers dig into my hips.

With a roar, he finds his release between my thighs, losing himself in me entirely.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-ONE

The moments after are always awkward. I'm not new to intimacy—I've had partners in the past—but no experience with anyone else has been like this. None have been like how it is with the King's Justice.

And that scares me in more ways than one.

Last time, I avoided the awkwardness because he was so arrogant, I'd just gone straight to washing up and pretending nothing had happened between us.

This time, it's different. And I'm not sure how to feel about it as he picks me up and dresses me without a word.

His hands are gentle. In his eyes are a reverence I don't understand. But he says nothing until he's dressed, too.

"You didn't get to rest, did you?" he asks, face turned to the sky. I squint and follow his gaze, but I can't make out whatever he's studying.

Kane looks at me with the hint of a smirk. I narrow my eyes. If he's going to pretend nothing happened, I'm fine with that. I don't need to be attached to him—I don't need to struggle with feelings that definitely aren't already brewing.

"I guess I didn't," I say. "But I'd like to get going."

"Going where?" He lifts an eyebrow as he gestures for me to follow.

"To the next destination on that map of yours," I say as we walk in a different direction from where I'd come, ignoring the ache between my legs—if he's not going to acknowledge it, I won't, either. "I want to get to your next lead and find the next base."

He doesn't respond, so I continue.

“If there are more silence domes, I want to find them. It makes no sense for the Red-Eyes to attack their own, but I noticed some don’t seem to be in their right minds, so maybe that’s why the Rebels need stones. And I can’t figure out how the venihira factor into all this, but it feels significant.” I kick the rocks at my feet, sweeping branches and leaves out of the way with my boot. “Whether it’s an internal war amongst the Rebels or simply their plans gone awry, I’m worried it will become widespread and affect more people.”

Even if—*when*—I earn my freedom, could I truly be free now that I know to fear the Rebels and their red-eyed monsters? No matter where I go, I’ll always worry everything will be ripped from me once again.

We emerge from the forest to three pairs of watching eyes. Not even Mariette has the shame to look away, and Maverik doesn’t hide his slow growing grin as he studies us.

“It was quite a decent number of stones that we got,” Greyson says loudly. I decide he’s my new favourite member of the Three simply for pretending he doesn’t know what *did not happen again* between me and Kane. “One of the bigger stashes we’ve retrieved. Was it not what you expected?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know how many I was expecting, but when the goal is one thousand, even seventy doesn’t feel enough.”

Maverik tilts his head and lifts a hand to his chin, though his eyes still sparkle with amusement. “I guess we never really thought of it that way.”

“Especially when your prisoners aren’t meant to survive the opportunity at all.” Mariette lifts a brow at the Three. Kane shrugs. None of the men seem apologetic about the truth.

“When you put it like that…” Maverik grins.

“I understand your concern,” says Greyson. “If we work toward your one thousand at a rate of fifty to sixty stones at a time, that can take a while. Is that going to be a problem?”

His silver eyes flick from me to Kane before going to Mariette. She crosses her arms and lifts her chin, but doesn’t answer.

Kane stiffens. I keep from scowling. If he’s pretending nothing happened, he can’t possibly expect to drink from me regularly, can he?

I don’t know how I’d answer if he were to ask. He might have opened up to me, but truly letting him in—past the physical connection—feels too much like letting him past my walls, and I don’t think I’m ready. In truth, if

he were to get close, I don't know if I would survive being abandoned by him.

I shift my weight and subtly take a step farther from Kane, giving everyone a bright smile. "Not that it hasn't been fun, but I'd prefer not being prisoners over being prisoners. Even yours."

Maverik barks out a laugh. "Fair enough."

"There is something that might help…" Greyson pauses as he meets my eyes.

"What do you mean?" I ask warily. "What more can we do?"

"Well, there is a rumour of something the king might want." Greyson slides his hands into his pockets, glancing from one cousin to the other as Maverik inhales sharply.

Kane doesn't move closer to me, staying utterly motionless; without seeing his face, I can't tell what he's thinking.

"As you know, he's quite—shall we say—interested in ancient artifacts." The wolf shifter rubs his jaw. "Most contain old magic that certain people can utilize, either by extracting or manipulating it." He gestures to Kane, indicating at his hidden collar.

"There are rumours of an artifact called the Sunstone. It's said to be incredibly powerful and can amplify a shifter's powers, and some even theorize its amplification can help the unbonded complete the bonding process." Greyson looks meaningfully at me. "Which means the king would handsomely reward anyone who can bring it to him. Likely even give a lifetime pardon to a prisoner."

"How do we find something like that?" Mariette demands.

Greyson shakes his head, and any hint of growing hope flickers out. "Unfortunately, it's one of those items we know very little about. The king's artifact hunters have to compete with regular people looking to make quick marks."

Mariette crosses her arms and lifts her chin. She—along with Kieran, Wickham, and the others—was one of those people.

"Even with the crown's resources, certain items continue to allude us. The Sunstone is one such artifact."

"So you don't even know how to figure out how you might start looking for it," I say. If the Sunstone can help unbonded shifters, there's a chance Kane can finally live in peace—without constantly silencing his dragon. But something doesn't feel right. "Why bring it up now?"

“That’s the thing,” Greyson says, turning to pick up his bag. “We suspect it’s related to the same venihira magic used when they created silence stones. Instead of silencing powers, the Sunstone increases them.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Is that the only reason you think there’s a connection?”

“There’s more.” He lifts a book from his bag and opens it carefully. “There’s something in the margins. It’s faint, but these drawings indicate two stones.”

We surround Greyson and peer at where he points. It looks like another children’s book, depicting what seems to be a village with people and animals scattered across the pages. Most of the words have faded, but what remains indicates a story about a girl and her friend meeting new people.

In the margins, someone has drawn a stone with a sun next to a stone with a moon, surrounded by a circle of smaller rocks.

“What makes you think this is related to the venihira?” I cock my head, trying to look at the picture from another angle.

“This book contains several short stories about fearing strange women who travel throughout various towns. Apparently, children who misbehave are taken from their beds at night by these women, who then take your ability to shift. Even if you’re allowed to return home, you remain unable to shift for the rest of your life.” Greyson lifts an eyebrow at me. “Sound familiar?”

Mariette rubs her arms and shivers. “As if they’ve taken your powers. Like they silence you—forever.”

“And you think those little rocks around the Sunstone are silence stones?” I point at the picture of the clustered dark circles.

Greyson nods. “There must be a reason this was drawn here.”

“It could have just been a creative kid,” Maverik points out. “Could have been someone bored out of their minds during their daily studies.”

“Could be,” Kane mutters. “But this book was in the possession of Rebels and protected by a silence dome. It’s unlikely these are all coincidences.”

“What’s that?” I point at a symbol drawn on the corner of the page. At first glance, it looks to be part of the book’s original illustrations, but it uses the same ink and style as the doodles of the stones.

“What’s what?” Greyson asks.

“That.” I bring my finger down until I hover just above the whorl and the words. “It says ‘The Wilds,’ I think.”

“There’s nothing there.” Maverik squints at where I point. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Maybe she needs more sleep,” Mariette says, straightening after tilting her head and narrowing her eyes at the page.

“Or maybe it’s another thing else she can see that we can’t.” Kane looks at me with a hint of that strange reverence.

“It’s an arrow that looks like this…” I draw the symbol in the air with my finger. “Next to the words, ‘The Wilds.’”

Greyson considers me for several moments before handing the book to Maverik. “Hold that right there.”

He turns and retrieves two more from his bag, passing one to Mariette as he opens the other, flipping page after page until he finds what he’s looking for.

Thrusting it to me, he asks, “What do you see? You too, Kane.”

Kane peers over my shoulder; I ignore the warmth of his closeness and focus on the book in Greyson’s hands.

“It’s another picture book?” I say, though my tone lifts at the last word so it sounds like a question. “Small people. Cats. Fire. It’s gruesome, for a children’s story. Are these meant to be more warnings against the venihira?”

“Same,” says the dragon shifter.

Greyson mumbles something under his breath and flips to another page.

“What about this?” He glances at Kane. “You too.”

“It’s part of another story,” Kane answers with a lifted brow. “People. Trees. Shifters. Arguments, I think?”

I nod. “And that arrow.”

Three pairs of eyes whip to me, with Greyson gesturing for me to continue.

“This one says, ‘by the.’” I let my finger hover over the words. “Same arrow.”

Greyson grunts. “What does the arrow look like? Show me again. Draw it on the ground.”

“Demanding.” Maverik rests an elbow on his cousin’s shoulder, presenting me with a stick while keeping the first book open in his other hand. “Here.”

“Right,” Greyson mumbles. “Please. Thank you. Yeah.”

“Okay…” I take it and crouch. The wolf shifter lowers as well, showing the book so I can reference it as I scratch at the soil.

“That looks like the Sunstone,” Kane says, pointing at the page in Maverik’s hand. “If we assume the first drawing is correct.”

“Oh, it does.” I look away from the book, lean back on my heels, and study the arrow I’ve made in the ground.

“Are you thinking these are clues to the Sunstone?” Mariette asks.

“They must be.” Greyson flips through the book. “It seems someone has left clues, but they’re visible only to those with venihira blood.”

“Everyone, grab a book,” Kane says tightly. “Look for pages with information relating to the venihira. Hopefully, we’ll be able to piece together what this is supposed to say.”

Greyson stands, telling us which books to start with as Kane passes them around.

When Kane hands me two, his fingers brush mine. My breath catches at the determination in his eyes and his stiff shoulders. If these books can lead us to the Sunstone, there’s a real chance he might finally get to live in peace with his dragon. King’s pardon or not, this suddenly feels so much more important.

“Whatever this is, we’ll find it,” he murmurs.

I can’t suppress the shiver on my skin. The Sunstone could quite literally change everything for him, but he sounds more concerned about my freedom when he’s the one who started life locked in a damp, dark dungeon. When he’s still living under his uncle’s thumb.

Emotions war in my chest as words tangle on my tongue; nothing seems grand enough to express what I’m feeling, especially when I’m not even sure what those feelings are.

Gratitude? Worry? Affection?

All I can do is bite my lip and nod as he walks away to read his own books.

Between the air of silence is the flipping of pages and occasional muttering until someone presents me with a drawing. Then the pattern repeats. Eventually, we all stand and look down at the assortment of words we’ve accumulated and marked onto the ground.

“The Wilds…where the…and find…” Maverik reads with a tilted head.

Mariette crosses her arms. “Near…meets the…go toward…”

“The Sunstone…by the power of?” Kane asks.

“Water…caves…moon?” I blink at Greyson. “This can’t possibly be complete, but we’re out of books. Maybe we left some clues behind?”

We’d pored over each book the wolf shifter kept from the Rebel’s base, but there was nothing else that I could see, and the words don’t make sense.

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “These are the only ones that might make sense.”

Maverik scratches the back of his neck. “Go toward The Wilds…”

“Find the power of the Sunstone near the caves by The Wilds…” Greyson mutters, trying to find the correct order of the words.

“Where the moon meets the caves?” Mariette tries.

“Go toward the water and find the power of the Sunstone near the caves?” Maverik taps his chin.

“Or maybe it’s talking about where the caves meet the water,” I say. “Do any of you know any mysterious caves that might also hold ancient artifacts? That are also near water or by The Wilds?”

Kane narrows his eyes, mouth parted slightly as he reads the words to himself. “No, but I do know a spot in a valley between two mountains, clear of obstructions, where you can see the sun set low on the horizon at any point of the year.”

“And where the sun sets…” I turn to him in realization.

“So does the moon,” he says, finishing my sentence.

“Not necessarily.” Greyson doesn’t look up. “But close enough.”

“Are there any caves nearby?” Mariette asks.

Greyson nods. “Yeah, there are.”

“Go toward the caves where the moon meets the water and find the power of the Sunstone near The Wilds.” I look out at the woods. “Near The Wilds? That’s not very specific.”

Greyson rubs his chin. “Maybe it’s not that you have to go near The Wilds, but you have to go to where the moon meets the water. Then in the direction of The Wilds, you’ll find the power of the Sunstone near the caves.”

“Either way, it’s worth checking. We’ll head there and see what comes up,” Maverik says.

Mariette turns to me with silent questions in her green eyes.

I swallow; it’s not just my life on the line, but she seems to trust me enough to be willing as long as I am. At my curt nod, the corners of her lips pull into a small smile.

It takes two days of riding before we finally arrive at the eastern border of Selerune—not that there are any physical walls preventing people from crossing into The Wilds—as the sun hangs low in the sky.

The Wilds are a part of Sylfar no one from Selerune ever visits. Everyone knows the eastern part of the continent is not a safe place, regardless of powers, because going into The Wilds is entering the territory of natural-born dragons. Without dragon shifters to boost Selerune's defences, even King Waylon leaves them alone.

Which is why my chest constricts as we emerge from the thinning forest and stop at a breathtaking view of a beautiful lake that stretches as far as my eyes can see. The evening hour deepens the blue, while the rays of the lowering sun casts sparkles glittering over the water. Rising into the clouds on either side of the lake are lush, green mountains providing shade to accompany the cool breeze wending its way toward us, making my skin prickle with unease despite the serene picture.

"There aren't any caves," Mariette says, hands on her hips as she looks out into the distance.

Kane grunts. "They're on the other side of the mountains."

I trace the water's edge with my eyes and follow it around the mountain. It took two days to get here, but it seems the end is not yet in sight. Swallowing, I study the ground between the mountain's base and the water; the path narrows the farther it stretches.

"We'll have to leave the horses here," Maverik says, patting his horse and dismounting. He doesn't even try offering to assist Mariette as she hops off right after him, likely having finally learned after her multiple quips.

The Three arm themselves, each adjusting their many swords and, in Greyson's case, his multiple ranged weapons of various styles in addition to his short blades. As soon as my feet hit the ground, I stride up to Kane.

He slides a knife into the bracer on his arm and lifts an eyebrow at my outstretched hand. "Yes?"

"Mariette and I need to be armed," I say without hesitation.

"You two are prisoners."

"Prisoners whose lives appear constantly at risk." I lift my chin. From the corner of my eyes, Maverik snickers. "And Maverik agreed, remember?"

He stops but smirks when Kane turns slowly to him.

Maverik shrugs.

Kane nods, sliding another knife into his bracer until its handle blends into the black of his armour, barely visible if I hadn't just watched him put it in.

"And you have plenty of weapons." I nod at the two swords peeking past his shoulders, then cast my eyes down to his arms before glancing at his legs and his boots, where I know many more daggers hide. "It's time we have our own."

He smirks, dragging his gaze down the entire front of my body. "Getting bold for a captive, hm?"

I push aside the images of what those lips have done—where on my body they've kissed, and how much I enjoyed it—and give him a smile of my own.

"Captive or not, you need me alive, and I need her alive." I tilt my head in my friend's direction. "Leaving us unarmed will not increase our chances of survival."

"How do I know you won't stab me in the back, Red?" he purrs, leaning down so his face is level with mine.

My smile turns wicked. "You don't. You'll just have to trust your instincts, King's Justice."

The amusement of his laugh wraps me with warmth, and I do my best to remember the truth of his words. Though I may be *his* prisoner, I am still a prisoner—even if he treats me like I'm so much more when his head is between my legs.

"Plus, you have plenty of armour protecting your back. I should know."

He chuckles. "All right, Ruby. You'll have your dagger. Or short sword, if you prefer?" He lifts a brow as he unsheathes both options, presenting me with one in each hand, the metal glowing in the blue hour. Over his shoulder, he says, "Though I can't speak for the other two fools on whether they are as confident in their abilities."

"I'd like to see her try." Maverik's loud laugh echoes in the open space.

Mariette's hackles rise at the wolf shifter's glee, and I force down my smile as I study the blades offered by Kane.

Now would not be the time to admit I've never used a weapon against another person.

As if sensing my thoughts, his fingers curl around the handles of both. “Have you ever used a blade before?”

His amusement-tinged voice is not unkind, but heat rises to my cheeks. “Yes. Of course, I have.”

“On a person?”

My silence answers the question for him.

“It isn’t anything to be ashamed of. Consider yourself lucky that you’ve not had reason to learn.”

“Yeah,” I mumble. “Lucky is definitely how I’d describe myself.”

“Yeah, Garnet,” he says softly. “Lucky. Tell me. Which of these have you wielded?”

“I’ve used a knife.” I debate pressing my hands against my cheeks to cool them, but opt to steady my breathing instead as his fingers adjust their grip on the handles. “I used to hunt. A little. Before…before all this.”

Why am I blushing? Why do I have to react to his gentle tone? I can manage when he’s angry or annoyed, but when he speaks to me like this—like I *matter*—I don’t know how to calm myself. I don’t know how to protect my heart.

“And by the way you handle yourself, you have experience facing someone in a fight.” His eyes glow with a hint of fury, but it’s not directed at me. “I imagine you’ll do well with a dagger, then. The weight of a short sword might throw you off balance.”

He puts the sword away and flips the dagger in the air; catching the pointed tip between his thumb and forefinger, he nudges the handle toward me.

“Now you’re armed, Ruby Red.”

“You’ve already used that,” I point out, taking the dagger and testing its weight in my palm. It’s heavy without feeling unwieldy or cumbersome, and I’m sure it’s higher quality and more expensive than anything I’ve ever owned.

“Not a onetime thing,” he purrs, suggesting he means something entirely different from the nickname. “Here, you’ll want this too. Can’t have you accidentally slicing yourself. That would defeat the entire purpose of arming you, wouldn’t it?”

I tense as he reaches around me, the warmth of his body drawing me in while he attaches the sheath to my belt, fingertips ghosting over the strip of exposed skin when he lifts the bottom of my shirt.

“No, can’t have that,” I breathe.

“I will be attaching my own sword, thanks.” Mariette’s sharp voice rings in my ear louder than it should have. I look up so fast, only Kane’s lightning reflexes keep our heads from colliding.

Maverik laughs as she snatches the sword and sheath from his hands.

“All right,” Kane says, straightening with a mischievous, crooked smile. “Now that we’re all armed and dangerous, let’s get going before the sun truly sets.”

“You’re leaving the books?” I ask Greyson, blinking at the bulging bags still hanging from his horse.

“Regrettably.” He sighs. “But the horses will take care of them.”

“Smart horses,” Mariette mutters, falling into step beside me.

The path is wide enough for everyone to walk side by side for some time, but Kane and Maverik lead while Greyson takes up the rear. Mariette and I stay quiet, tucked between the Three as the blue of the sky continues to darken. The lake laps gently at the ground, soaking the soil nearly all the way to the path beneath our feet. Prickles of unease crawl over my skin with each cool breeze—but of course, they do. We’re closer to The Wilds than I have ever been. My mind knows dragons won’t simply burst over the mountain to snatch us away, but my racing heart seems convinced otherwise.

When the air is still, the lake’s undisturbed clear water reveals colourful rocks that make up the riverbed, each stone marbling with ripples of light, making the depths seem deceptively shallow. I swallow and lean away, reaching out to the increasingly angled base of the mountain on my right and trail my hand along the thick vegetation. The higher I look, the more the green thins, giving way to large rocks and compact soil. Thankfully, I don’t think we’ll need to climb.

“Watch out.” Maverik lifts a branch, holding it out of the way for Mariette, who turns to watch as I duck beneath it, making sure I’m right behind her.

“Thanks,” I say. The panther shifter dips her head in acknowledgement, her shrewd green eyes filling with worry as the setting sun’s eerie blue light reflects off the mist growing on the lake.

“You can hold your own,” Maverik says with a snicker, pulling the branch farther before releasing it right into Greyson’s waiting hand.

The fog thickens with each passing moment, glowing with mystery as though personally smothering the last dredges of light while dancing with the shadows curling in from both sides. The feeling of unease turns into a dull alarm ringing in my ears.

“Fire Opal, you okay back there?” Kane asks without turning around, as if sensing my growing apprehension.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I say, sounding not at all fine.

“She can’t see well enough.” Mariette points at a root sticking up in the ground, her other hand squeezing mine in warning. I had indeed missed it. “It’s getting too dark. Someone needs to light the way for her.”

“Ah.” Maverik stops, turning and scratching his head as he looks around, a faint glowing arising from the sides of his eyes. Kane uses similar magic to enhance his sight, but Mariette doesn’t seem to have any issues with night vision and doesn’t need to focus on channeling her magic in such a precise manner just yet.

Greyson, with eyes barely glowing, shrugs his bag from his shoulders and reaches in. When he lights a small lantern, I blink rapidly against the brightness; the group waits silently as my eyes adjust.

Greyson hands the source of light to me, and I take it gratefully.

“You should have said something,” Kane grumbles, crossing his arms.

“You should have known,” Mariette snaps, releasing my hand and pointing at another tripping hazard.

The lantern’s light reveals the tension lining her shoulders; I understand the edge in her voice. She must feel a similar sense of foreboding, but mine has grown into a pit into which all my words of comfort are lost. Instead of reaching out and grabbing her hand with a certainty I also don’t have, I keep mine slung loosely over the hilt of the dagger at my side, taking comfort in its weight.

Kane sighs and runs his fingers through his hair. “Yeah. I should have.”

My brows pull together. Have shadows crawled into my ears to meddle with my hearing? It’s not an apology, but I hadn’t expected even an admission—especially not toward Mariette, whose mouth opens slightly.

“Right,” she says quietly, shoulders deflating when Kane doesn’t seem inclined to argue. “Well, since that’s resolved…”

“Shall we continue?” asks Greyson as he adjusts his pack.

“Yeah, let’s keep going.” I refuse to look at Kane, even when I feel the heat of his golden eyes lingering on me. Mariette points at an uneven spot

on the ground, and I give her a grateful smile as I walk around it.

“Oh!” Mariette lets out a soft shout as she stumbles. Her hand wraps around my elbow, throwing me off balance as well.

I lose my footing and trip over the hole I thought I’d avoided. A strong arm wraps around my waist as a large hand clasps over mine, holding the lantern steady and keeping it from falling out of my grasp.

“I don’t need your help.” Mariette pushes Maverik with one hand while steadying herself against the side of the mountain. The wolf shifter chuckles but steps aside as she dusts herself off.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, squeezing Kane’s forearm gratefully when he releases me—though he hovers even as I step out of his grasp.

“Yeah.” She crouches and waves a hand in the air, but the shadows of the overreaching foliage hide her expression. “It looks like the laces of my boots came undone—oh! Because one of the fasteners fell off. I doubt it’s far back. I’ll just grab it. You guys go on ahead.”

“We should go together,” I say, glancing out at the thick blanket of fog rolling over the water.

Mariette shakes her head and steps out from the shadows with a reassuring smile. “The path back there is too narrow for all of us, and I’ll be quick. Plus, it’s getting darker. Soon, even I won’t be able to see without that lantern of yours.”

“I have a spare fastener,” Greyson says, closing the flap of his bag with one hand, the other outstretched with the metal piece in his palm.

Mariette’s expression tightens for a fraction of a moment, but it must have been a trick of the shadows, because her smile brightens immediately as she takes it from the wolf shifter. “That’s great, thank you.”

She bends to adjust her laces, but she curses.

“What is it?” I ask. The wind carries a chill with it, making all the little hairs on the back of my neck stand.

“It looks like my stupid fastener took part of the lace with it. I’ll have to redo the entire thing.” Mariette looks up at the sky, then down the length of the path still ahead of us. “You guys should still go on ahead. You’re a little slower than we are, Scarlet. I’ll catch up quicker on my own.”

I worry my lower lip. She has a point; I’m sure we would have been there by now if it weren’t for my terrible sight. Even with the lantern, I still take extra time considering the positioning of each step.

“I’ll stay,” Maverik says, stopping at my side. His bulk adds to the shadows flickering from the light in my hand. “I’ll keep your friend safe.”

Mariette huffs. “Her fellow prisoner, you mean?”

He shrugs with a smile. “Either way, you won’t be alone.”

“Not that your presence makes me feel any safer,” she mutters.

I don’t like leaving Mariette behind, but Maverik’s right. She won’t be alone, and no one—including Mariette herself—seems concerned. Maybe my instincts have become too sensitive from the constant threat of death; maybe I’m the only one who sees dark omens where the others just see shadows. I take a deep breath.

Besides, it will only be a few moments.

The memory of the Three threatening to hunt us down if we tried to escape from their clutches used to be a terrifying thought, but now it brings me comfort. Even if Mariette were to lose her way in the darkness, they would find her. Maverik would find her.

And she would be okay.

I tighten my hold on the lantern. “Please hurry. I don’t…Just hurry. And be careful.”

She nods and swallows, looking out at the thick mist. “My vision’s good, but it’s not that good. I’ll be back before you know it.”

With a nod, Kane, Greyson, and I continue, but my heart hammers harder with each step, the sound of my blood pounding in my ears increasing in volume until I release a shuddering breath. The shadows seem darker, and the air feels more sinister. Every snap of a twig and rustle of leaves sounds like the start of something far more ominous.

Another breeze blows through the fog, its cold embrace sending chills straight to the growing pit in my stomach.

The lantern’s handle bites into my palm. My fingers tighten around the hilt of Kane’s dagger sheathed at my hip.

How long have we been walking? How long have Mariette and Maverik been on their own?

They must be close by now; travelling together means they can walk much faster. They’ll catch up in no time. I just have to focus on my own steps. Focus on the ground. Focus on my breathing.

They’ll be here soon.

A dark figure appears in my periphery.

I gasp.

“Hey.” Kane’s voice wraps around me like a blanket weighed by comfort. His heavy arm drops over my shoulders, his warmth chasing away the chills and loosening the fear constricting my chest.

“Breathe,” he says.

I do.

But a scream rings in the air, ripping that breath from me entirely.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-TWO

"What was—"

Kane pushes me behind him, hand still wrapped around my wrist to keep me from stumbling. The flame of my lantern flickers, rocking as I catch my balance. My heart pounds in my ears, mixing with the sounds of every horrible scenario conjured by my frightened mind.

Silver light bursts in my periphery. By the time I look over, Greyson is already a smudge of white slipping into the shadows as he runs back in the direction from which we came.

"We have to follow," I say, pushing past Kane's stiff body. But his strong arm keeps me back.

"*We* aren't running." He takes the light from me.

"Hey!" I reach for it, but he extinguishes the small flame and drops the lantern, letting it clatter uselessly on the ground. "We can't just—Mariette could be hurt!"

"Here."

Kane offers me a hand. I take it, blinking against the darkness and willing my eyes to adjust as I step to follow Greyson.

With a twist of his wrist, Kane yanks me back to him. He holds me to his chest for a moment—a moment we can't spare!—before maneuvering so I stand facing his back, all the while keeping hold of my hand. With his other, he adjusts the swords and attaches them to his hip instead. Then he crouches in front of me and places my hand on his shoulder.

"Grab on."

I hesitate for only one heartbeat before climbing onto his back.

He loops his arms through my legs and keeps me steady as he takes off running to follow Greyson. I tighten my hold around his neck as I will my mind to quiet. To stop imagining the worst scenarios as my head buzzes.

Even in his human form, Kane is fast. The night air whips my cheeks, and I duck into his shoulder, squinting against the darkness. Hoping to see anything that might hint as to what happened.

It was a female scream—I'm sure of it.

What I don't understand is why.

Was it Mariette?

Why did she scream?

Where's Maverik?

I want to ask Kane all these questions and more, but I resist; I don't want to distract him when he needs to focus on getting us there.

A howl splits the air, and in my heart, I know the long, steady call is for Kane—for us. Its deep notes pierce right into my heart, taking control of its rapid beating. I hold tighter onto Kane, biting my lip to keep from whimpering in fear for Mariette and Maverik.

Because if something's happened to her, something must have happened to him first.

Kane veers off the original path, taking us through a small break on the mountainside where the trail is not as steep.

"Where are they?" I finally ask. "How far did we go?"

Kane turns slightly so I can hear his words. "We didn't get too far, but there are signs of struggle."

I don't care how he knows this, how he can understand so much from a wolf's howl. Instead, I exhale, trying to see what he sees. But the darkness blurs into streaks of greys and blues and blacks as we gain altitude. The surrounding woods get denser before thinning, and I still can't work out what could have happened.

"They're not far now. I hear them."

I nod against his shoulder and, against my better judgement, press my face into the crook of his neck, letting myself draw comfort from his warmth. His arms tighten around my legs, but thank the skies he doesn't say anything—I don't know if I can handle any teasing right now.

When Kane finally slows, my eyes have adjusted. My blood chills, and I gape at the sight before us.

Greyson, in his wolf form and with raised hackles, snarls at the white dome shimmering around Maverik. And only Maverik.

Where's Mariette?

The glow of the barrier lights their surroundings, and the debris, the gouged soil, the torn bushes, and the broken branches tear me apart from within.

Maverik shouts something, but Greyson doesn't seem to hear—or doesn't care.

Kane's muscles tighten beneath me as we approach. With a glance at the shield, I understand why.

Flickering with light on the ground at the other end, barely five paces from Maverik, is a small incendiary.

I remember how deadly it is. I remember the explosion it caused, and how it would have killed both me and Mariette, had it been better aimed.

And Maverik is trapped with it inside the dome.

If it were to explode even ten more paces from him, he might survive. But when it's this close, I doubt even one of the King's Three can escape death.

"Where's Mariette?" My words come out rushed and strung together as I push away from Kane. His arms tighten for a moment before he releases me, though his hands trail my thighs as I slide off.

"We need to get him out of there." He growls, eyes focused on Maverik and the terrible walls threatening his cousin's life. I can almost see the gears turning in his head as he considers their options, his jaw working as he looks from Greyson to the shimmering barrier.

"You need to look for Mariette," Maverik shouts. "They've taken her!"

"Who?" I can't bear to look at the surrounding wreckage, but I have to. This dome looks just like the silencing dome at the Rebel base, so I can help him—but someone needs to help Mariette.

The ground at the base of the dome is a mess; Greyson must have dug his way around while searching for the perimeter's stones. Kane presses his fingers against it, testing the magic. The incendiary, a dark-grey ball barely the size of my fist, rolls as if blown by a breeze. The glowing markings scrawled across its rounded surface pulse with light.

"Can you see anything?" Kane barks at me.

"I'm looking!" I separate from them and walk along the barrier, sifting through the mess of dirt and grass while my fists clench at my sides, my

breathing erratic with worry.

“Listen to me,” Maverik says to Kane, voice low and rumbling. “The Rebels took her. I don’t think there were any Red-Eyes, but”—he growls and runs a hand over his hair, breathing heavily—“She needed a moment of privacy. I know it was stupid, but she was right there. I didn’t sense anyone. Didn’t even smell anything.”

The incendiary shakes. The whorls pulse.

“We have to get you out of here first,” Kane growls. “Then we’ll deal with whatever happened to the panther.”

Maverik curses and punches the barrier. Sparks of white and blue crackle where his fist meets the magic; it must burn him, but he only snarls.

“You don’t have time!” The wolf shifter turns to me, silver eyes wide with growing panic. “You need to get him out of here. To find her.”

I clench my teeth and ignore the loud buzzing in my head, shaking as the truth of Kane’s words press against my heart. He’s right. I hate that he’s right. He and Greyson won’t leave their cousin—their *brother*—and I’m the only one who can help them break the dome. The faster we help Maverik, the sooner we can look for Mariette.

The incendiary shudders and rocks on the spot.

I hate that we can’t help both.

I hate that we have to choose.

I kick a bush and let out a cry of frustration, but my boot collides with something hard and pain shoots up my leg. Curse my shiftless vision!

Kane and Greyson—back in his human form—immediately turn to me as I hop on one foot, stomping the ground to dispel the tingling when something gleams in the corners of my eyes.

“It has to be here,” I say through clenched teeth, dropping to my knees and tearing at the bush.

Kane crosses the distance with several quick strides, Greyson at his side. Both with swords already drawn as I rip out handfuls of thin branches and mutter prayers to the skies, the light so faint I gnaw on my bottom lip, worried I had imagined it.

Even though I’m sure the other silence dome sat right on its stones, there was nothing on the ground surrounding this one, so these shields can be cast from afar. Which means it has to be here. It has to.

“I didn’t hear anything from there.” Maverik runs a hand over his hair, chest heaving with heavy breaths. Impatience and frustration line his voice.

“I didn’t hear anything from anywhere.”

“Clear the other underbrush,” Kane barks, yanking me up and out of the way. Greyson nods stiffly and swings his sword, hacking at the dense foliage around the shield.

“There!” I pull against Kane’s grip, pointing at the shimmer of light with a shaky finger as I brush the sweat from my forehead with my other hand.

Kane walks up to the wrecked bush and looks at the spot without seeing what I see. Lifting his sword, he glances at me once more. I nod. He drives his blade down with both hands; the sharp tip strikes the centre of the flat stone and cracks it in half, splitting the glowing symbol down the middle.

The rune pulses twice before fading.

The dome flickers, becoming more transparent than before.

“It worked!” I exclaim with a sigh of relief. Clinging to hope, I widen my circling, eyes dragging through the foliage as I kick with each step in an attempt to reveal another spark.

Kane does the same just paces ahead of me, hacking at the underbrush and sweeping his foot through to check for invisible stones. Even if he can’t see them, he can feel them—and I would see the glow.

“Here!” I shout. Kane returns to my side in an instant, sword pointed down. Greyson’s eyes narrow as he glances at the distance between where I stand now and the first stone they’d broken. In three strides, he moves to a new spot and begins clearing the bushes.

“There.” I point again, holding my breath and trying to ignore the sphere on the other side of the barrier, rocking and crackling right by my foot.

Please let this work. Please let this work.

Kane brings his sword down. The rock splits, and the symbol pulses before disappearing along with the dome around their cousin.

Faster than I thought possible, Greyson turns and grabs the incendiary, winds his arm back, and throws it into the air. Just as it disappears, Kane leaps for me, tackling me to the ground and knocking the breath from my lungs. I expect my head to slam back, but when I open my eyes, I see only the darkness of Kane’s armour as he presses himself against my entire body, his hand cradling the back of my head.

“What did you—”

A bright light bursts, followed quickly by a loud crack that leaves my ears ringing.

I gasp and clutch at his armour, holding him to me even though he's left no space between us.

"Is it over?" I whisper, bracing for the shards that could be raining over us as we speak.

Kane grunts but remains completely still, even after my hearing returns to normal. When he finally lifts himself off me, he does so slowly—like a predator expecting another.

I rise on shaky legs and breathe a sigh of relief; it seems Greyson threw it far enough for us to have escaped the explosive's effects.

"Where's Mariette?" I ask, rounding on the wolf shifter, who's already sniffing the air as Kane and Greyson study our surroundings.

"I don't know which way they went," Maverik growls, running a hand over his hair as he spins on his heel.

"How did this happen?" I want to grab him by the shoulders and shake him, but though he seems unharmed, he looks completely dishevelled. Like he already blames himself.

Maverik takes several deep breaths, jaw still clenched in anger. "I turned around for one second. Nothing smelled out of place. I heard no one. Sensed no one. There was no reason anyone could have snuck up on me."

I fill my lungs with a long breath. "I believe that," I say, flexing my hands to keep the frustration out of my voice.

"You didn't even see the direction they came from?" Kane crosses his arms, eyes searching the area as his head tilts to listen. "The direction they might have tossed those stones from?"

Maverik presses his palms to his eyes, taking a deep breath. "No. Nothing." His arms drop limply to his sides as he gestures to the ground where the dome had encircled him. "One moment she screams. The next, I'm in here and she's gone. Without a trace."

He tilts his head up to the sky, closing his eyes as his chest rises and falls with his irregular breaths.

"We can't just leave her." I study the surrounding area, looking for any signs of disturbance despite my inferior night vision even as hope dries into a trickle. My heart gallops with fear, and standing here feels too much like we're doing nothing. But what can we do? "Can you smell anything now?"

The Three shake their heads in unison, and the bubbles of worry rise in my chest, threatening to break free as helplessness creeps into my voice. “What do we do, then? What can we do?”

Maverik glances at Kane. Greyson looks away from me.

A cold wave laps at my insides, the slow but unmistakable numbing sensation of abandonment crawling, clawing, into my heart. That raw, vulnerable pain of realizing a decision’s already been made. Without me.

“You can’t leave her.” My voice cracks as that familiar ache digs its talons into my very being. “You can’t just—”

I look at Maverik. He turns his head to the side, but I glimpse a flash of pain in his eyes and the defeat sitting heavy on his shoulders.

“No. Not you, too,” I say. He had seemed desperate for us to leave and help Mariette, knowing it would have cost him his life. Had wanted us to prioritize her. What’s changed?

“The Rebels took her.” I look up at the dark, cloudy sky and blink back tears, a dull ache already throbbing at my temples from the memory of her fear and reluctance to leave the castle. Her face, pale with dread, every time we were close to Rebels. “She must have been in some sort of trouble with them. That must be why she wanted to stay in the dungeon. Where they couldn’t get her.”

Leaning against the rough bark of a tree, I hold the bridge of my nose and take deep breaths, but it doesn’t soothe my agitation—the frustration roaring in my chest at my own stupidity. My selfishness. I should have listened to her. I should never have forced her to come. It’s my fault they have her.

Kane drags a hand through his hair and glances up at the sky before meeting my eyes with his shadowed gaze. “If we can’t scent anything now, we won’t find them by blindly walking around in the dark. They were able to surprise Maverik, which means they have a way of hiding from us.”

A lump forms in my throat. My entire body trembles. I don’t know what he’s going to say next, but I know I won’t like it.

“We don’t have time to look for her.”

My jagged breath sends tiny knives down my throat and into my chest. They slice me from the inside, each cut a pain that isn’t enough to overwhelm me on its own, but together, all at once—I can’t breathe.

“The—the moon.” I stumble over my words, looking for anything that might change his mind. But I know it’s too late. The moon is barely a sliver

hanging in the middle of a sea of shadows. “You said they can handle it. Can handle you.”

“If we can get to the Sunstone before the new moon, we can help Kane tame his dragon. We can go home and receive your pardon.” Greyson’s shoulders heave with his heavy sigh. “We’ll be able to help Mariette then.”

“*Then* might be too late!” My heart clenches as I hold back a sob. “We should find her first. The Sunstone will still be there, but she might not.”

“Not like this. Not with you around. We can’t risk it.” Kane shakes his head, his dark hair like a halo of death as he seals Mariette’s fate.

The pale sliver of moonlight peeking past the clouds sharpens the angles of his face, darkening the surrounding shadows. He looks more sinister tonight than in any other form I’ve witnessed, but not because he’s the King’s Justice. Not because his shift is a bloodthirsty dragon.

He’s more dangerous now than ever before, because his refusal is a jagged knife stuck right between my ribs. I’d been aware of the invisible boundaries between us as warden and prisoner. I might not have always remembered, but I’d known. I’d *known*.

And yet.

A part of me, buried deep within the darkest depths of my mind, sparked with the smallest hope that we—all of us—had become something more. Not friends, but at least something worth protecting. Something worth helping.

I know Kane isn’t abandoning me. I know that.

But each time he shakes his head, my heart doesn’t know the difference.

What I do know is that he won’t abandon his brothers, but he will abandon Mariette.

Which means he will abandon me, too.

Kane wormed his way into my mind and my heart; there’s no mistaking this pain as the rusty blade twists in my chest, threatening to reveal the true depths of my feelings for the King’s Justice. Threatening to put my mistakes on display before cleaving them from my heart.

I put on my armour; I sharpen my regret and sadness and turn them into the blazes of anger I know will consume my heart if I let it.

And I want to let it.

Fury will dull the pain of my horrible mistake. Rage will protect me.

“You don’t know what could happen if we don’t get the Sunstone,” Kane says. “You haven’t seen the dangers of my dragon. You haven’t seen

the destruction we can wreak upon people—entire towns—when things go wrong. You don't know what you're risking."

I step closer to him and curl my lip in a snarl. "*You* know exactly what *you're* risking."

"We can't drop everything and stop our plans for some girl you met in the dungeons!" Kane's growl vibrates from his chest. The slant of the scar above his eyebrow wrinkles with the anger twisting his face.

I'm some girl you met in the dungeons, my mind whispers. But I don't say that.

"Fine," I say instead, my voice harder than steel. Behind Kane, the wolves' pity only adds fuel to the fires roaring in my chest. "Fine. You go and find the Sunstone. I will find her."

Greyson's brows furrow in confusion. Kane's jaw twitches.

Maverik blinks as if he hadn't heard me correctly.

"If you can't *risk* it while I'm around, then I will solve the problem for you by not being around." I spit the words with all the vehemence of my anger and let myself sink into it so nothing and no one can hurt me. "You already know the way. You can go find the Sunstone yourselves, but I am not coming. I won't leave her behind."

"You can't just go off on your own." Kane narrows his eyes. "You're still our prisoner."

"That doesn't seem to mean much, does it?" I snap. "If you were so worried about your prisoners, we'd be looking for her right this moment."

"What he means is it won't be safe," Greyson says. His placating tone only stokes the flames of my fury. "And we can look for her together—after."

"There might not be an after!" I let the next words tumble out of my mouth. "And you don't even care. None of you care."

I lift my eyes to meet Kane's as I inject every ounce of hatred and contempt into my gaze—just as he had done before. "I shouldn't have expected anything from you. I should have known you don't care about anyone or anything else other than yourselves. You're a monster made human. Your uncle was right to keep you locked away."

He jerks back. Something flashes in his eyes, but he blinks it away so I might have imagined it. I don't wait for him to respond.

"You're the King's Justice. I shouldn't have forgotten that. It was my mistake, and it's one I won't be making again." I shake my head and clench

my fists. My entire body trembles, but I don't care. Let them see my weaknesses. Let them see my vulnerabilities. Let them see it all now, because they won't be seeing it again.

"You know where you're going," I say through clenched teeth. "You don't need me anymore."

"What about your pardon?" Kane sneers, looking down at me with eyes devoid of emotion. "Don't you still want your precious freedom?"

I sneer right back. "Not if it's earned like this. Not by abandoning people who matter to me. When I get her, we'll find our way back to the castle and serve out our sentences instead."

"You'd rather rot in the dungeon than continue travelling with me?"

"I'd rather rot in the dungeon than spend another second with you!" I snap. "I'd rather spend the rest of my days confined to those damp cells than spend another moment with a monster who does not know the difference between right and wrong. A monster who would abandon others for his own needs."

My hands stay curled at my sides, but my entire body heaves as I take one deep breath after another, further stoking the flames of anger. Keeping them burning hot enough to avoid thinking of my mistake. I shouldn't have let Kane in. I shouldn't have let myself care for him—for any of them. I should have known better. I did know better.

And yet…

"I'm going to find her. I'm going to help her," I whisper. "And I don't care what you choose."

With a final glance at Kane's stoic face and blank eyes, I turn from the King's Three and leave them behind.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-THREE

I walk for a long time under the darkness of the night, numbed by pain and regret and shame and guilt, until finally stumbling upon a road. When a kind trader stops and offers me a ride into the next town, my feet hurt almost as much as my heart.

Almost.

The trader introduces herself to me, but I forget her name immediately as I climb into the back of her caravan and curl against the crates of vegetables.

I wrap around myself arms that don't feel like mine.

I tuck to my chest legs that don't feel like mine.

Dropping my cheek against my knees, the tears finally fall.

I'm so stupid.

I know better.

They weren't friends, and they weren't family.

They were the King's Three. The most ruthless shifters in Selerune. They were our guards, and we were their prisoners.

I'd told myself not to be fooled when they saved our lives. I'd told myself not to fall for their jokes. I'd told myself their friendliness could not —would not—create cracks in my armour.

Each ragged breath slices my lungs with pain. Hot tears burn my eyes. I make no effort to contain them, letting the anguish of my own stupidity leak from me in hopes I'll never make the same mistake again.

The darkness of the caravan presses around me as I succumb to my heartache, mourning the loss of warmth and friendship; the reality of loneliness creeping back. I sob openly into my arms, and even the deep,

gasping breaths don’t feel enough to express the grief of having lost what had never truly existed at all.

The creak of wood seeps into my cloudy dreams before a heavy pounding slams me back into my body. Groggy from the half-conscious state of not-quite-sleeping and not-quite-awake for the entire duration of the ride, I blink heavily against the sudden brightness as the caravan doors swing open, my head feeling hollow and empty.

“Well, how do you do?” asks the trader. Her lean arms fix one door to the side of the caravan before doing the same to the other. “You’re lucky I was hungry.”

“What?” I murmur, rubbing my eyes and slowly rising to let the stiffness melt from my joints as I mumble my appreciation. The first few steps are tricky, but I jump out of her caravan without making a complete fool of myself to see, as she’d promised, we’ve arrived in a large village—or a small town—and we’re stopped in front of what looks to be the rear side of a building.

Her brown eyes soften, and she reaches into her vest. “You look like you can use this.”

I blink at the blonde as she reaches for my hand. She can’t be much older than I am, and her fingers are just as calloused as mine, but her eyes contain more kindness than I’ve ever seen from anyone back in Grengrove. It’s almost enough to make me cry again.

The trader presses something into my palm and gives me a gentle smile. When I uncurl my fingers, tears immediately blur my vision.

“But you don’t even know me,” I say between sniffles. “Why would you help me like this?”

“No one walks alone in the forest like that if they can help it.” She raises her brows in a knowing look, but I’m not sure what she thinks she knows. All I can focus on is the pouch of coins in my hand.

“This is too much. Just a few will do.” I pick past the bronze and silver marks to grab a few coppers before pulling the string closed and pushing it back to her. Glancing at the vegetables still visible inside her caravan, I say, “You work hard for this.”

She laughs and waves a hand, closing her other one over mine. “Don’t worry about me. I wasn’t being kind when I said you look like you need this. I’d believe you if you said the skies spat you out.” She winks. “Now, you also look like you could use a hot meal. I have to unload everything here, so I can’t take you, but if you go down that way, there’s the most popular inn of Lynshire. Warm bed and hot food await you there.”

I swallow several times, unable to find the words of gratitude that might even begin to encompass generosity of this magnitude. Nothing seems enough.

“Thank you,” I say lamely.

She winks again. “Like I said, you do not look good, girl. Now go on.”

The trader turns from me and hops up into her caravan without another backward glance. I let my gaze linger on her strong form as she checks the crates, trying to memorize what kindness looks like before I make my way to the inn.

To where I have some difficult decisions to make.

The sun shines brightly overhead as I take my first steps into the village of Lynshire, following the cobblestone road away from the back alley and onto the street to be greeted by a row of stores.

The street is busy enough that no one gives me a second look. After the weeks I’ve had, anonymity is comforting. I consider pressing my fingers to my swollen eyes, but I don’t want to draw any attention, so I slip one hand into my pocket and rest the other on the hilt of the dagger still at my side.

Kane’s dagger.

I immediately brush aside all thoughts of the King’s Justice even as my heart clenches. I will not be thinking about him ever again. If I’m lucky, I will not run into him here or at the castle or anywhere.

I will find Mariette and save her, and everything else can come after.

A tall building catches my eye, and I’m suddenly reminded I’m on the outer fringes of Selerune. It takes such a long time for announcements to arrive even to Grengrove, there’s a chance Lynshire might not receive the notice at all if the king were to add me to a list of escaped prisoners.

Maybe…

I shake my head. *Everything else comes after.*

The trader didn’t tell me the inn’s name, but given we’re in a village, I doubt Lynshire offers more than two options for lodging.

Thanks to the kind woman, I can get something to eat once I find it—but I won't get a room just yet. I'll ask around and see if anyone has seen the Rebels or heard of any recent Rebel activity. The ride here from the mountain was only one night at a caravan's pace. Whoever took Mariette will have been travelling much faster, but I'm still hoping someone spotted them.

Someone has to have seen something—or at least heard something.

I bite my bottom lip as I weave past the occasional crowd. Despite my protective black vest, boots, and the dagger at my hip, no one give me a second glance. Perhaps things are different this far from Seluria.

The sound of music and loud conversation drifts over, so I turn at the next corner and follow the joyous laughter. At the end of the block is a building taller than the others, and though I can't read the wooden sign above what I assume is its front door, I'm sure I've found the inn. The ruckus appears to be from the large gathering of people at the tables scattered on the road in front of the building, spilling into the outdoor seating area of the restaurant beside it. Or maybe the establishments share the space—it's difficult to tell from how far I am.

The musician, standing in the middle of the road across from the inn, enthusiastically shouts something I can't hear. The crowd responds in kind.

The sheer joy of the scene brings a smile to my face. It's difficult not to feel positive when the sun warms my skin and the sound of music curls in my ears. Plus, the prospect of a hot meal combined with so many people to inquire—it makes me feel like I can do this. I can find Mariette.

In fact, I'm feeling so good and so sure that as I walk toward the inn, I see someone who looks just like her. She sits at a table with several friends, half-eaten plates forgotten. The woman's short, dark hair, pulled into two tails, bounces at the top of her head as she bobs along to the music.

A small, tight ball of guilt forms in the pit of my stomach. I shake my head. The happiness and positivity of this place, of these people, are getting to me; I need to stay sharp.

I'm not here to enjoy myself. How can I, when Rebels could be torturing my friend this very moment?

I give the woman another glance—the one who reminds me of Mariette—as I approach the crowd. She turns back to the table and reaches for her drink.

I freeze mid-step.

Her fingers wrap around the glass. She lifts it to her face.

My heart stops.

Bright green eyes turn to someone, listening as they speak.

She drinks. Keeps hold of the glass.

Turns to another friend, who points at the musician.

Then she looks away, and her face is hidden from me once more.

I stumble when someone knocks into my shoulder.

"Watch it!" the man mutters. "Stopping in the middle of the street. You wilders are something else."

"I—I'm sorry," I mumble, tripping over my own feet.

"Oh. Are you okay?" The man's eyebrows rise high on his forehead as he grabs my arm, steadying me. "I didn't know you weren't feeling well."

Concerned eyes look me over, studying what I'm sure is a gaunt expression on my pale face.

"Um." I glance at Mariette once more and inhale sharply. The image of her—whole and hale and *enjoying herself* out in the daylight, right in the middle of a crowd, and not at all scared or worried—presses on my chest and squeezes the air from me. My head spins. Nausea rises. Saliva pools in my mouth. It's difficult to swallow.

Some girl you met in the dungeons.

"Can I take you to the inn?" asks the man. His hand still grips my arm, but his other hovers nearby as if ready in case I collapse.

"N-no." I swallow past the lump in my throat and force my heart to calm. Will my breathing to steady.

The man gives me a wary look, his concern still blatant. He releases me when I straighten, though his stance is still wide and ready. "Are you sure?"

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I hold it for several counts, calling back to my days in The Cage, when I had to fight even when I didn't want to. Even when I was scared. When I had a spare moment to breathe and calm myself before facing an opponent.

Right now, I have the advantage. She doesn't know I'm here. She doesn't know I've found her. She doesn't know I've discovered her betrayal.

I inhale once more, breathing in courage and strength.

I exhale the pain. The deception. The regret.

I pretend this doesn't shake me to my core.

When I open my eyes, the man looks just about to call for help.

Relaxing my face, I force a small smile. “I’m fine, thank you. I just realized I’ve forgotten something.”

An eyebrow rises. “Forgotten something?”

“It’s a very important something. I’m going to get it, but thank you for your help,” I explain, turning from his skeptical nod.

Thank the skies he’s not such a good man that he insists on escorting me to make sure I make it to my destination, because I stride straight to the stables.

It costs almost all the marks from the trader to borrow a horse, but with a promise to return him before sunset tomorrow, I gallop out of Lynshire and back toward the mountains.

I hadn’t noticed it before, but the constant, strange buzzing in the back of my head has disappeared. In the silence of my thoughts, I realize it started when the Dracori first held me, and it has persisted since; I’ve simply grown to ignore it, assuming it was an effect from proximity to silence stones as a shiftless, or even a symptom of stress from all the attempts on my life. But it’s been gone since I woke this morning in the trader’s caravan.

Yet, something pulls me in a certain direction, so I ride toward it. The closer we get to the mountain, the stronger that feeling grows. It’s not that familiar buzzing, but it feels right.

When it becomes a faint tingling, I know I’m right.

We ride fast and hard, stopping only for water. By the time the sun begins its descent on the horizon, we’ve climbed high enough that the path in the woods is too narrow for my horse, and I have to abandon him.

“I’m so sorry. I really hope you know your way home,” I mutter, rubbing his nose and giving him another carrot from the bag hanging at his side. “But in case you don’t, I did leave a note for your owner. Someone will be looking for you soon enough.”

With a final pat, I leave him and continue on foot, accompanied only by the sounds of the wilderness around me.

Even though he couldn’t talk back, having the horse was much nicer than walking on my own. Without another creature to tune into, my mind

strays into thoughts I'd managed to avoid all day. Questions I have no answers for.

Who took Mariette?

Why would they let her freely roam Lynshire?

Was she in trouble at all?

But the question that burns brightest in my mind is the one that hurts the most.

Who is Mariette?

I'm mad at myself for lowering my walls with Kane, Greyson, and Maverik, but they never pretended to be anyone except who they are. They never made any concessions about their positions or roles or their power.

It's my fault I got attached.

But Mariette is—*was*—my friend.

I haven't known her for long, but she made it seem as if time didn't matter. She acted as if I were her friend—acted as if she cared about me.

Was she even mad at me for taking her out of the dungeon, or had that been a lie, too?

I shake my head. Whatever Mariette had wanted—whatever her goal was—she got it. She must have. Otherwise, she wouldn't be out and about, enjoying her day while I worried she was hurt or being tortured.

Every part of me aches with a depth I can't explain. The hurt reaches into my mind, my soul, and into my past. It blends with the pain of before—before I got into this mess, before I fought for Spencer, before my siblings left me—and it becomes a new, ugly monster threatening to consume me whole.

But I take deep, gasping gulps of air.

I survived the before. I will survive the now.

Even if doubt and regret for what I said to Kane creeps past my anger and joins the chaos, I will survive.

Once I do what's right and help him retrieve the Sunstone, I will face the consequences of my actions—and I will survive that, too.

My legs tremble at the thought of facing the King's Three once more. I left on horrible terms. I said things to Kane that I'd meant in the moment. I might still mean them now. But I don't know anymore.

I don't know what's real, and I don't know who to trust.

I don't hope for forgiveness. I don't even hope for acceptance.

The only thing I have left is what feels right, and everything that comes afterward will simply have to come.

I grind my teeth at the thought of what I might say. How I might explain myself. Would it even matter? Would they even need my help anymore, now that they have the directions to the Sunstone?

I have to try.

If they shackle me and take me back to the castle, I will accept my fate.

If they reject me entirely, I will decide then what to do.

Right now, I put one foot in front of the other and focus on that sensation tickling the back of my mind, letting it steer me in the right direction.

Because if I don't, I'll lose myself to thoughts about Mariette. Kane. The Three. My life and future and everything I have left.

And what I don't.

All because I'd lost myself to the pains of my past, letting them resurface in my defense of the wrong person.

I climb for a long time, following the strange sensation in my mind as it becomes a loud buzz. Now that I know what the feeling is, I can't believe I didn't notice this before.

Branches and leaves of trees sway with the cooling breeze; I hope their gentle rustling and crackling hide my clumsy, loud steps that would otherwise announce my arrival to any predators in the area—especially Red-Eyes. But the chill on my skin is from more than just the wind.

With the sun slowly setting and painting everything a warm yellow, my thoughts turn back to Kane's golden eyes—both the soft tenderness I'd seen in them, and the anger.

And…something else.

I don't know if I want it to be true, but there might have been hurt in his amber gaze. I saw it for just a breath before he took it back and hid it behind a wall of emptiness. It happened so quickly that I'm half-convinced I'd made it up, especially because I simply cannot fathom the idea I could hurt the King's Justice. Hurting him means he cares about me—or at the very least, about what I think—and what existed between us was purely physical.

Wasn't it?

I shake my head, blink, and realize I don't recognize any of my surroundings. I've been walking and adjusting my path according to the

buzzing in my head, and while I can't say I know for sure I would have recognized the route from before, I can say for certain I don't recognize the one I'm on now.

Still, I press on.

I walk until the foliage thins, and I can see the warm sky between the trees ahead. The closer I get, the faster my heart races. I force my body to loosen and for my breaths to stay steady even as a lump forms in my throat. I square my shoulders and straighten my back while that lump drops right into my stomach when I arrive at a ledge overlooking the lake.

The wide, rocky shore below leads to many caves surrounded by thick woods, and I curse myself for having taken the path that I did.

I've walked too high. I'm too far up.

The wind lifts three distinct, deep voices up toward me, and I bite back a gasp of unexpected pain spearing through my heart. I knew it would hurt to see them after what I'd said, but the guilt and shame mix to create a whirling vortex of regret I can't fully face.

Though they are far below the ledge, their forms are unmistakable. My eyes immediately find Kane, and I involuntarily release a breath of relief. He's still in his human form, and though he doesn't exactly look well, he seems whole enough.

"This should be the place," Greyson says, turning to observe the shore, the caves, and the dense woods at their backs.

Maverik nods, expression sterner than I'd expected as he stares into the shadows amongst the trees. "The Wilds are that way."

"One of those, then." Kane's rough voice winds through the air, and I resist the urge to close my eyes and let the sound soothe my aching heart.

In my fear of abandonment, I've alienated the only people willing to help me—for a woman who deceived me. I don't deserve comfort or reassurance.

Walking along the edge, I follow their steps as they round the shore toward a pair of caves tucked into the mountainside, one by the water while the other sits closer to the woods, and search for a way down as I consider what stupid thing I might say in greeting.

"Hi, it's me. The fool who ran off to help someone who didn't even need help."

"Hi. I'm sorry I said what I said. I'm not sure if I mean it even now, but I'm back to help, if you'll still have me."

“You remember me? The idiot who screamed at you about being a monster for not wanting to help Mariette? Yeah, as it turns out, she didn’t need help after all.”

Kane lets out a growl, interrupting the thoughts swirling in my head. I tuck a lock of hair back behind my ear when a breeze blows it loose.

“We’ll go in that one and—” He freezes, shoulders tightening.

“What is it?” Greyson asks a moment before stilling as well. My heart rate picks up, beating even faster than it already was.

Kane turns and looks up.

Directly into my eyes.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-FOUR

I open my mouth to say something. To explain myself. To apologize. To say anything at all.

But I can't.

In the same breath that his eyes widen in shock, they also widen in fear.

In the same heartbeat that I try to speak, the cold metal of a blade presses against my throat.

An arm wraps around my waist, yanking me into a hard chest. I gasp when the metal nicks my skin, tilting my face upward.

"Don't move an inch." Hot breaths warm my cheek as the man speaks near my ear, his arm tightening to ensure I can't slip free.

I swallow my whimper when an impossible number of Dracori emerge from the woods—some on horseback—alongside wolves, bears, panthers, and other shifters I can't see from my angle held against the man, whose voice tickles at the edge of familiarity.

"I've got her!" he shouts. I flinch from the volume of his voice, but freeze when the sharp edge of his blade threatens to break my skin.

I want to see Kane.

I need to see his reaction.

Is this another trick?

Have I been deceived again?

Have I misunderstood how enraged they are? Did they call the Dracori to drag me back to the castle to spite me?

But the raw fear in Kane's eyes right before the guard took a blade to my throat—I don't know if even he can feign that.

“Good.” The slick voice comes from below, but it slithers around me as his words reach us. “Bring her down.”

Cold fear licks the edges of my mind when the Dracori nods.

“How?” I rasp, glancing at the steep drop below our feet without moving my head. I still can’t see Kane, Greyson, or Maverik, and my throat tightens at the thought they might have done this.

A small voice in the back of my mind whispers insidiously that calling the guards is well within their right; they could have brought me back to the castle themselves, but if they wanted to spite me, if they would rather intimidate me with a swarm of Dracori, why shouldn’t they? They’re the King’s Three. They have the men at their disposal.

Someone walks toward us, their heavy steps sending vibrations up the soles of my boots. I can’t see who it is, but I hear a wet huffing before the man releases me—only to drag me onto the back of a giant brown bear with him.

I twist, but I’m too slow. He pins my arms behind me and ties my wrists together, grabbing my waist with one hand and a handful of fur with the other. I grunt and kick the bear’s side. He growls and turns, snapping at the air and barely missing my foot.

Before I can gather myself, the bear charges down the side of the ledge, and only the man’s arm keeps me from falling off.

I cough at the jarring impact of the bear’s rough landing. The Dracori hops off, yanking my arm with him and unceremoniously pulling me off the bear. I trip over my own feet; he releases me. With my hands bound, I immediately lose balance and fall, gasping as pain shoots through my shoulder.

I kick as he approaches, but he grabs a fistful of my hair and drags me up, pressing the blade to my neck once more.

“Show some respect,” the Dracori snarls. “You’re standing before your king.”

I freeze. *My king?*

Kane wouldn’t have.

As much as he might hate me, I’m certain he despises his uncle more.

“What is this?” I croak.

“That’s what I’d like to know.” Kane steps forward in my periphery, flanked by Greyson and Maverik. I can’t see his expression, but his ice-cold

voice leaves no room for misunderstanding the anger simmering just below the surface. “What are you doing, Uncle?”

“Do you remember what I told you when I saved you from the dungeon?” The king ignores Kane’s question and strides past his many guards, stopping just before his nephew and out of my view. King Waylon’s white hair, long and tied at the nape, flows down his back, contrasting the dark armour but complementing its red and gold decorative pieces.

The Dracori holding me tightens his grip on my hair, and I bite my lip.

“What did I say about moving?” he whispers. “Though you don’t seem to listen too well. Maybe you shouldn’t have run off with the Justice, huh?”

A ripple of anger cuts through my fear as I suddenly recall the voice.

Kieran.

How had the bear shifter weaseled his way into the king’s guard? How had he become a Dracori?

Kieran shuffles us to the left, just enough to see Kane and watch as the golden hilt of the king’s sword glints dangerously at his waist, his long white hair flowing midway down his back.

“You said quite a few things.” Kane doesn’t glance at me, but his jaw ticks with tension. “I’m certain I can’t remember to which you’re referring.”

“My dear nephew.” King Waylon steps to the side, hands clasped behind him as he paces in front of Kane, paying no mind to the wolf shifters at Kane’s side. My blood thunders in my ears, but I hear his words clearly. “I told you there is only so much the stones of your collar can do. You agreed to come to me when you feel its powers fade.”

Kane stiffens. Maverik’s lips curl slightly. Greyson doesn’t move an inch.

“You were to tell me. I would have helped you.” The king’s voice sends another chill racing down my spine; his tone implies the opposite of his words.

“You and I both know help is not what you offer. What you offer is a prison,” Kane snarls. “What do you want with her? Why did you bring such a collection of Dracori?”

The dragon shifter keeps his gaze on his uncle’s face. I clench my fists to keep from trembling; even as Kieran presses the blade closer to my throat, relief—unbidden but not unwelcome—seeps into my veins. It isn’t Kane. As angry with me as he might be, he didn’t call for the king.

It’s silly. It’s stupid. I might die today, but the knowledge Kane isn’t the one who wanted me dragged back to the castle brings an embarrassing amount of comfort.

“A prison?” Despite the king’s voice staying at the same volume, anger tinges his words. “I let you out of the dungeon. I let you breathe fresh air. I give you freedom. You dare disrespect my generosity by calling yourself a prisoner?”

“That is between you and me, Uncle,” Kane seethes. “What does the lowly shiftless have to do with anything?”

Hurt trickles down my throat, but I press it down deep into the depths of my mind. There is no time for silly things like hurt feelings; I have to focus.

“Oh, but you have no idea, do you?” The king’s voice turns as smooth as silk, and he turns slowly from his nephews to me and Kieran. The Dracori around us, in human and animal form alike, blur as my vision homes in on King Waylon. “Or maybe you do.”

Atop the king’s white hair sits a golden crown decorated with red jewels. His face reminds me of the Three; though his angles aren’t as defined, power resonates from his stature alone, and I flinch as his sharp, silver eyes rove my face and body, seeing something I don’t understand.

Kane still does not look at me, but Maverik’s eyes narrow at their uncle.

“She may not shift, but she’s certainly no shiftless.” The king hums, and my pulse quickens; Greyson had said something similar, but he’d never made me fear for my life. Not like this.

Anger flashes in Kane’s eyes—anger and fear—before he composes himself and rolls his shoulders. “The question still stands.”

“Let’s take a step back, shall we?” The king smiles wickedly and looks up at the sky. My blood thunders in my ears. “As I said, you do remember I told you to come to me when the power of your collar fades?”

Kane takes a deep breath and slides his hands into the pockets of his pants, teeth clenched tight as he gives one quick nod.

“And you felt it fade, did you not?”

Kane’s amber eyes narrow with hatred. His jaw twitches.

“Yet you came here.” The king turns to look at the cave mouth, exposing his back to his nephews. “To the location of the Sunstone.”

The cousins freeze. My heart stops at the emptiness of their expressions—but why? They said the king would want the stone. They said the king

wanted it so much more than silence stones, he'd offer pardons for the Sunstone.

But they'd also said no one could find it. That no one knew its exact location.

Then how does King Waylon know the Sunstone is here?

Did they lie to me…or has the king lied to his nephews?

It feels like everyone waits with bated breath for King Waylon to continue. Waits for answers to questions no one can voice.

"You've figured out I tied the collar to the moon's phases, haven't you?" He clicks his tongue. "It took quite a long time, longer than I expected, though you never were the clever one. I assume it was Greyson who did the work for you?"

Greyson doesn't even blink when King Waylon cocks his head.

"No matter. Even the clever one couldn't have known the type of magic I infused with the silence stones." He turns and studies the Three; shadows obscure parts of his face, making him more sinister even when he does nothing but look. "Tell me, what did you expect to find here? And I don't mean the Sunstone itself. I mean, what did you think it would do for you? Did you think it would free you from your restraints? Or perhaps you had hoped it would help you overcome the need for one entirely?"

I can't help but bristle at the king's condescension. Is it so wrong to want freedom from under someone's thumb? To have control of our own lives and make our own choices?

"I had hoped not to need this collar anymore, yes," Kane answers through gritted teeth.

"You fool. There is nothing here." The king tosses his head back, his harsh laugh echoing among the crowd. Some Dracori chuckle nervously; though they follow their king, few forget the power of his Justice. Even Kieran shifts uncomfortably behind me.

"How do you know?" Kane snarls, barely keeping from spitting at his uncle. "What have you done?"

"Just what do you think I used to enhance the silence stones?" King Waylon drawls with a lifted brow. "What do you think has been holding you back? What do you think has had the power to keep that monster of yours in check?"

He grins widely as the horror of his words dawns on Kane, on his cousins, and even on me.

“Why now?” Kane asks quietly.

King Waylon’s smile twists into something slick. Malice rolls off him in waves I can’t see but can sense as it prickles at my skin.

“Why did you wait so long to reveal this?” Kane demands, hands curled into fists. I want to close my eyes, but I can’t look away from his anger—anger that hides the agony beneath. His cousins move slightly; Greyson adjusts the cuffs of his sleeves, and Maverik casually rests his hand on the hilt of his sword, as if stretching.

“It was on a need-to-know basis.” The king looks down his nose at the Three despite being just shorter.

“And we need to know now?” Maverik asks, voice low.

The king tilts his head as if considering whether to deign himself to reply.

“Fine,” Kane snaps. “We know now. Let the shiftless go and get out of our way so we can return to business. Lot of things on your list, as you’re aware. Stones to recover. Rebels to hunt. People to kill.”

Despite the growl, I hear the slight tremor behind his words.

What will the king do to him as punishment? Or worse—what will he make Kane do?

Because King Waylon’s eyes sparkle with malice, with knowing that Kane doesn’t want to do the things he’s made to do as the Justice. The cruel king finds joy in this specific brand of torturing his nephew. In turning Kane into the monster everyone believes he is.

The monster he believes I think he is.

“Oh, but now we get to the fun part.” King Waylon’s grin widens, and he rolls his shoulders as he turns to me. “Now, we talk about her.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand, and every instinct I’ve ever honed screams at me to leave. To get away from here.

“Why.” Kane growls the question as a statement. A demand.

“Why?” repeats his uncle. His eyes slide from my head down to my feet, dragging up to meet my gaze as I shiver. “Because she is a venihira.”

I flinch; he says the word as if I were a challenge. Prey to a predator. I’d never given much thought to whether the king would care about me or what I might be, but his words feel like an arrow nocked and aimed between my eyes, and I’m suddenly grateful the Three’s expressions harden. They aren’t the ones who informed him.

“And what in the skies is a venihira, Uncle?” Kane drawls. The irreverence in his voice snags at the corners of the king’s mouth. “Surely not worth this delay when we have more pressing matters, such as Red-Eyes to hunt?”

“You’re a fool, but not this much,” King Waylon sneers, his cool façade cracking for the first time. “You know about her powers. You’ve known for some time, haven’t you?”

“I’m sure we have no idea what you’re talking about,” Kane answers with a lifted brow, shifting his weight as he rolls his shoulders and slips his hands out of his pockets. “We’ve travelled with her and have seen no evidence of anything more than the pathetic uselessness of a shiftless.”

Kieran huffs a laugh behind me. Kane’s words are harsh, but a wave of gratitude warms my heart even as fear tightens its claws. He’s protecting me.

Even after what I’d said, even after the hurt I’d inflicted, Kane is still protecting me.

I hate myself, but he doesn’t hate me.

“Don’t lie.” King Waylon’s eyes flash with anger. “You’ve known, and you had hoped to keep her a secret from me. But you forget your place in this family. Your place in this kingdom.”

Kane crosses his arms and glares at his uncle.

“You were hoping her venihira blood would lead you to the Sunstone. And while she may have succeeded there, you failed to get here before I did.”

“Enough nattering,” Kane snaps, threads of magic bursting around him. “What is it you want? Why have you come all this way?”

The surrounding Dracori stir. Even Kieran steps away from me to draw his sword in one hand while the other keeps the blade at my neck. The Three don’t even glance their way as the king gestures for them to stand down.

“You’re right,” King Waylon says, shadows darkening his silver eyes into a cruel steel grey. “There has been too much. Too much talk, too much freedom. I’ve loosened your reins for too long, and you’ve forgotten not only your place, but to whom you owe your life.”

I take a shuddering breath and shift my weight from one foot to the other. Kieran glances at me, and I do it again, though I add a wince for

show. His face scrunches in disgust, but he turns his eyes back to the king and doesn't look at me when I move a third time.

Even when I shuffle my hands.

Kieran didn't bind my wrists with cuffs. He'd used rope.

When I'm sure his attention is wholly on King Waylon and the Three, I adjust my weight again, twisting my fingers in search of the ends of my bindings.

"This is why I am here now. To remind you. Once I got wind of your little excursion straying from your assignments, I knew your restraints were fading. Combined with the little venihira here?" He waves a hand at me while keeping his eyes on Kane. "It was obvious where you would go."

King Waylon paces calmly in front of his nephews, shaking his head as if disappointed but unsurprised. "What do you think happens when your collar weakens? Why do you think your dragon has been acting up more than usual? Yes, I know about that, too."

Kane's arms bulge across his chest as his jaw ticks. My fingers quiver against the rope cutting into my skin.

"The Sunstone increases power, but I'm sure you already knew that, given you're here. What you don't know is it grants its wielder—me—control over you." The king opens his jacket and reaches into an inner pocket, retrieving a wand half the length of his forearm. Glowing at the top is a roughly cut gem flickering with the colour of flames. "Which, I'll admit, was a nice surprise when I had the silence stones imbued with the Sunstone's magic."

The air seems to chill at his wicked smile. My heart sinks in anticipation of his next words as Kane slowly shakes his head. "I'd only wanted to give you a boost—just enough to keep you coming back. Imagine my shock when it opened your dragon to the power of suggestion."

Maverik's eyes widen. Greyson's face twists with horror.

King Waylon hums as he lifts the wand, stroking the fiery gem with one finger. "My suggestions."

Kane shutters every emotion behind all his walls.

The king shakes his head, a frown tugging at his lips. "I thought I'd give you the chance to come around on your own, but it is clear to me now that you have no sense of respect or appreciation for the one who raised you from those skies-damned dungeons."

Greyson steps forward and rests a hand on his cousin’s shoulder. I’ve been trembling so much, Kieran doesn’t even look my way anymore.

“You feel it already, don’t you? You’ve been feeling it.” King Waylon’s smugness permeates the air, thick and threatening to choke me with his malevolence. “Your dragon writhes within you as the powers of the Sunstone fade from your collar. He wants to come out. He wants the stability only I can provide. My influence gives him peace. No more fighting. No more uncertainty. Only my word. He doesn’t want to fight anymore, and neither do you. Why don’t you let him out?”

Kane’s brow furrows as he struggles with his internal battle.

My heart pounds harder as my fingers finally grasp the end of the rope wrapped around my wrists. It takes several tries to push the ends through the tight loop, but I have to get free. Kane can’t give in to the king. He can’t shift and become the king’s personal pet.

How is this even a choice?

How can he even consider what the king is asking?

My heart breaks for him. My throat aches tell him he’s not the monster everyone thinks he is. My soul yearns to promise we’ll find a path to peace —together.

I blink away the unshed tears burning my eyes and clench my teeth.

Focus.

“I know you feel the pull of the Sunstone, Kane. As its magic fades from your collar, your dragon craves more.” The king looks lovingly at the gem as he twirls the wand, his silver eyes reflecting gold in its amber colour. “The Sunstone can increase your power to quiet the dragon and his thirst, but it can also give you peace. Both of you. He knows it. He feels it. Each time you shift, he gives a little more of himself to me. He’s tired of fighting, and so are you. You won’t have to fight each other anymore. You only need to do as I say. Obey my word. Release your dragon, and let him release himself to me. There’s a freedom in letting go.”

“And if I say no?” Kane whispers, hands fisted at his sides. Barely holding back from trembling. Barely convincing anyone he isn’t considering his uncle’s offer. Another crack splinters my heart, and I exhale through my nose as I finally loosen my bindings.

King Waylon smiles as his Dracori raise their weapons and the shifted crouch. The air fills with growls and snarls, everyone waiting to see who acts first.

“Then Kieran kills her.” He speaks so casually, the words don’t register in my mind for several heartbeats. But when the traitorous bear shifter pulls me closer, the king’s intention becomes clear. I grab the ends of the loose rope around my wrists and clutch them tightly to my palms as Kieran presses me to him, the tip of his knife held right against my skin.

Kane scoffs. “What does it matter to me?”

“Oh?” asks the king. My heart skips a beat.

Kieran’s knife digs into my neck. I hiss as drops of hot blood trail down my skin.

Kane’s eyes widen with fury. His nose flares, and he takes half a step forward, silver magic swirling around his arms, before catching himself. King Waylon lifts his chin in triumph.

I swallow a whimper and cast pleading glances at Greyson and Maverik, but their eyes are trained only on their uncle, pain blatant on their faces. Why aren’t they helping Kane? Why aren’t they doing anything?

Please, my mind begs. *Please, don’t let him do this. Don’t let him—*

“Why.”

King Waylon tilts his head before breaking into a wide smile. “Because you have not been respectful in your human form, and because your dragon is much more useful to me, and because venihira are the scum the skies spat out.”

“You’ll kill her anyway,” Greyson says slowly.

The king nods, and ice freezes my limbs.

Kane doesn’t meet my eyes.

Please. Don’t do this for me.

“I—I’ve never…” I swallow. “I promise I won’t—whatever it is—”

“But I will give her a head start.” The king rolls his shoulders back and laughs as if I hadn’t spoken. “At least this way, you won’t have to watch her die.”

Despite Kieran, despite the blade, I have to ask. Have to try again. Pressing myself closer to the bear shifter to give myself an inch of space from the knife at my throat, I try again.

“Why?” I croak. “What’s…Why me?”

When the king turns to me, mirth and malice melt from his expression. He’s completely devoid of emotion, warmth, and even cruelty. “Because your kind are the worst. Liars and thieves who steal from shifters and hide from us what is rightfully ours.”

I try to shake my head, but the blade pricks me and Kane's eyes widen in warning. "I've never stolen from anyone."

"It doesn't matter. Your ancestors did, and I'm still, to this day, untangling the messes they left behind. The Sunstone, for example." He gestures at the cave behind him with a long sigh. "Skies, that took a long time. Took a long time to sniff out the few venihira to help, too."

My heart stutters. "Other venihira?"

"Oh, don't you worry." He wags a finger at me. "They're gone, too. I do believe you are the last one. Not for long, though."

The king turns, dismissing me as he addresses his nephew again. "So what do you say? Let's work together. Properly, this time."

Kane growls deep and low, but he doesn't deny his uncle.

"Don't do it!" I stomp on Kieran's foot, duck, and throw my shoulder against his arm. He drops both the knife and sword as he slams a fist into my side.

The world is a blur as I groan, panting and gasping for air. "Don't—"

"Shut up," Kieran growls, yanking on my bindings. The rope slips from my wrists, and I twist.

Kane's empty golden eyes meet mine. Then he lets his walls drop. He shows me his pain. His regret. His apologies.

"NO!" I shriek as he unsheathes his swords and turns.

Kieran pulls his fist back, but I'm prepared. I drop and grab his fallen dagger. Shouts and cries ring all around me, but I focus on kicking Kieran's knee. When he buckles, I dash out of his reach and sprint toward Kane, blinking back tears as the Three fight Dracori from all sides.

Maverik and Greyson slice their way through the royal guards, making a path for their cousin. Kane's short swords cut down one after another, but he doesn't look at them. He isn't even looking at the king.

He looks only at me.

Even as he sends men and women to their deaths, he doesn't spare them a single glance as he slashes his way to me.

Laughter rings in the air somewhere. King Waylon must be out of his mind to laugh at a time like this, but I don't care.

I have to reach Kane and Greyson and Maverik. Then, we'll get out of here. We'll escape the king's clutches. We'll find a way to free him from needing the Sunstone.

For a breath, it seems possible.

For a heartbeat, warm golden eyes fill my world.

For a moment, I think we'll escape.

Then Kane's eyes widen with terror. He drops both swords.

He sprints for me, as I run to him.

But blinding pain shoots through my side. My vision turns red, then white. Then involuntary tears turn everything into a blur.

I blink and look down.

At the pointed tip of a crimson-coated sword just below my ribs.

Why is it coming out of my body?

Why is it red?

It twists.

Then it's gone.

I gasp. It sounds wet.

My legs shake. I turn.

"Kieran," I rasp, my mind slowly—so slowly—understanding.

His lips twist into a sneer. There's no regret in his black eyes. "I told you not to move."

The cacophonous sounds of fighting fade to a dull roar in my ears as I stumble from him. Every breath sends lightning coursing through my veins, but I don't care about Kieran. I sway and take another step toward Kane.

My legs are as heavy as stone. Each step takes more effort than the last. But I can't stop. I have to get to him. We have to get away. I place one foot ahead of the other, because Kane's looking at me with those eyes—that gaze like I'm the only one he sees. I'm the only one who matters. I'm the most precious thing in his world.

A strangled cry escapes my mouth as my knees buckle.

Then I'm in his arms.

I sink into Kane, engulfed by his warmth and his scent. Peace settles over my heart even as metal and teeth and claws clash around us.

Everything will be okay.

I slowly blink awake. I must have lost consciousness; I'm lying on the ground, still in Kane's arms and still looking into his golden irises, but it's quiet and dark.

No swords clang. No shifters growl.

“W-what?” I ask, tasting sweetness on my tongue. “Did we…escape?”

Worry melts from him, and his expression softens as he studies my face.

Kane might be the most beautiful person I’ve ever met.

He gives me a crooked smile. “Well I suppose that’s only fair, because I think you’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever met, too.”

“You…heard that?” My eyebrows pull together as I swallow and wet my lips. “Stop listening to my thoughts.”

“You said it out loud.”

“Oh.”

He leans down and presses a kiss to my forehead, letting his lips linger as I close my eyes and sigh against him. I sag with relief and contentment as he adjusts to press his face into my hair. He inhales deeply.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t buy us more time,” he murmurs, nuzzling my neck as his arms tighten around me.

“What do you mean?” I open my eyes from the sudden panic spearing my heart and cutting the fog of relief. “Why—what’s happened?”

Kane pulls me closer, wrapping his arms even tighter around me as he presses me to his chest. I breathe in his scent, but it doesn’t quell my worry.

“I’m going to miss you, Crimson,” he rasps into the crook of my neck.

I push his chest, wanting to look at his face as I demand answers, but he’s a wall of solid muscle. Immovable against my struggling.

“Tell me what’s happening.” Fear takes hold of me when I feel the rapid beating of his heart against my open palm. “Please.”

Before I beg a third time, he releases me so suddenly, I fall forward and land on my hands.

My heart stops. My tongue feels too large for my mouth.

Several Dracori drag Kane by the arms, expressionless as they walk him to the grinning king.

Numbness spreads from my chest toward every limb, and I sit uselessly on the ground, propped up by my hands and unable to move as Kane pulls the collar up so it sits over the neck of his shirt. King Waylon taps the wand against the strip of black leather, and the gem flickers with fiery power.

Kane blinks and shutters every emotion, but he keeps his empty eyes on me even as he addresses his uncle. “You said you’d let her go.”

Looking frantically for Greyson and Maverik, I can’t help the gurgle that rises from my throat when I see both standing with their hands bound

in front of them, their fury aimed entirely at the king.

“Once you shift,” King Waylon says, tapping the gem on his collar once more.

Kane winces, and I feel the pain in my own heart. “Not—”

But it’s too late.

Strands of silver burst from the King’s Justice, engulfing him until he’s completely hidden from my view.

“No!” I rise on unsteady legs. I have to get to him. I have to stop him from shifting. I have to help him—

Someone holds me back, yanking me by the arms. Two someones. Greyson and Maverik each grip one of my elbows; the cuffs still sit on their wrists, but the links between them dangle uselessly in the air as the wolves keep me in place. Keep me from Kane.

“We have to stop him!” I shriek, head spinning with terror. Helplessness grips my heart, pressing against my chest as I wrench my arms from the cousins whose fingers only tighten on me. “What are you doing! We have to—”

“No,” Greyson interrupts. His heavy eyes say everything his voice can’t. “Kane made a deal. We can’t.”

“No!” I kick at Greyson and Maverik even as they drag me back, my heels digging into the dirt.

A thunderous roar erupts, shaking the ground beneath my feet and opening a chasm in my chest. My heart tumbles into the void as I stop struggling and look up at the rippling golden scales of Kane’s dragon.

When he roars again, I think I whimper.

The king points at the closest man. The dragon opens his jaws. The man disappears.

King Waylon aims the wretched wand at the ground. The dragon throws his head back and forth, growling as he surveys the scene before him. As he surveys us.

The king barks a command. The dragon snaps at the air.

Then he makes a sound I’ve never heard before—a sound of pain—because the king waves the wand, and the gem glows.

I slap a hand over my mouth and swallow my gasp as Waylon climbs onto Kane’s back. He waves the skies-cursed thing again as everyone, including his Dracori, watch while powerful golden wings beat the air twice before they shoot up above the treetops.

“You’d better start running now, venihira,” the king says with a laugh. “This is your head start!”

The Dracori murmur in confusion as their king flies away on the back of his Justice, watching until they become a gold speck in the dark clouds.

I tense when they turn to me, one by one, as if remembering their king’s orders.

Maverik and Greyson draw their swords, the links of their shackles clinging between them as they step up to flank me.

“Any chance those silencing cuffs don’t work on you two?” I mutter.

Greyson chuckles.

Maverik shakes his head. “We won’t need our shifts for this.”

Shrill cries slice the air, and everyone looks up at the dark blurs streaking through the treetops. My eyes widen when the birds drop several dark-grey balls pulsing with light.

The cousins recognize them in the same moment I do. Maverik grabs my wrist and crouches, spinning until my arm wraps around his shoulder and my front presses against his back. My legs instinctively wrap around his waist when he rises to his full height.

The birds are still dropping incendiaries, and the Dracori glance at each other in confusion.

“Follow me!”

The three of us whip our heads toward the familiar voice, and I don’t know if my sob is from heartache or relief when I see the short, brown tails sticking up at the top of her head.

She waves from knee-deep water around the outside of the farthest cave as the birds continue distracting the perplexed Dracori.

Just as Maverik and Greyson dive into the water—while I still cling desperately to the shifter’s back—the first of the incendiaries ignite.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-FIVE

I hear the explosions for only one breath before the bangs, the screams, and the deaths are muffled. The water isn't deep enough this close to shore, and another bang drives us farther from land; I cling to Maverik, my arms wrapped tightly around his neck as he swims after Greyson and Mariette.

My head pounds, questions mixing with pain both in my heart and on my bruised, battered body. I hold back a sob but let my tears mix with the lake. I must have been on the brink of death if Kane's blood couldn't heal everything.

He saved my life, and I did nothing as he was taken.

When my lungs burn for air, I shift my arm and tap Maverik on the shoulder quickly before clutching him again.

He nods once, then looks around. The clear water gives the illusion of a shallow lake, and behind us, the glow of the incendiaries' fire burns bright. But my head is a mess, and I can't tell what anything is or how far we are from shore.

He swims up and we break through the water's surface. I gasp for air as Greyson emerges nearby, but Mariette waves for us to continue. I remove a hand from Maverik's neck to wipe my face and get a better look, but I only blink at what I see.

"Is that—"

"Yeah," Maverik answers.

Mariette swims back to us, followed closely by a large sea creature—maybe a type of shark?—wearing a strange harness. I glance down at the bottom of the lake; it must be deeper than I thought.

The shark slices through the water as it approaches. Maverik tenses beneath my arms.

Mariette gestures for us to hold on.

“Come on!” she snaps as another explosion wracks the shore, hidden from view behind the caves.

Maverik and Greyson don’t hesitate again. They swim toward the shifter and reach out, grabbing onto what looks to be handles on the harness, while Mariette does the same on our right. She taps the shark twice, turns to us, and tilts her head.

“Take a deep breath,” Maverik mumbles.

“What?” I ask.

He holds both my arms in one hand. Adjusts his grip on the handle with his other.

Then the shark swims.

I barely have time to hold my breath before water whips my face, slashing my skin as though the drops were solid. Gasping and sputtering against the endless torrent, I don’t know if I can do this. I don’t know if I can hang on—keep hanging on. I can’t be strong anymore.

I wasn’t strong when Kane was taken.

How can I be strong now?

As if sensing my struggle, Maverik’s fingers tighten on my arms, reminding me he’s here. They’re here.

I’m not alone.

But Kane is.

They’re here with me, but Kane is…

I’m going to miss you, Crimson.

I let my tears mix with the relentless lake water as I clench my teeth and hang on.

It feels as though an eternity has passed by the time the shark finally slows. Maverik, Greyson, and Mariette release their hold on the handles and wade to shore while behind us, silver strands glow under the clear water, engulfing the shark whole. A human’s silhouette emerges from the magic, swimming toward us as Maverik climbs onto the rocky shore.

“I can walk,” I mutter, legs still crossed over his abdomen.

“I know.” His voice is gravelly as his arms loop under my knees and hold me tightly to him.

I drop my head on his shoulder and breathe in his lake-water scent as we drip onto the rocks. Maybe he needs the comfort as much as I do.

A woman about my size—smaller than Maverik, Greyson, and Mariette—climbs ashore, wringing water out of her braided hair. In the blue light of the dark night, I think she might be a brunette as she walks up to Mariette and turns almond-shaped eyes to me and the wolf shifters.

“Really, Mariette?” The woman clicks her tongue, picking at her skin-tight dark outfit. When I squint, I see the pointed shadows of weapons sticking out from her thighs as well as the tops of her boots. “You guys look like a bunch of drowned cats, you know?”

From over Maverik’s shoulder, I watch as the woman gracefully dances out of the way when Mariette elbows her in the side. “Don’t mind Robin.”

Without the sound of explosives and panicking Dracori behind us, I can’t tell how far we swam, especially when the water, rocky shores, and surrounding mountains and woods look similar yet different from the landscape we’d just left behind.

Like how we’d left Kane behind.

I bite my lip and will the thoughts out of my head. I need to focus on what’s in front of me. The people in front of me.

We’ll help him, but we need to regroup first.

“We don’t mind Robin,” Maverik says in a measured voice. “We do mind you, though.”

I stiffen. I didn’t get a chance to explain what I’d seen, but by Maverik’s tone and Greyson’s stance, they rightfully suspect something.

Robin scrunches her nose, looking down at us despite being shorter than everyone standing on the shore. Mariette nods slowly, her contemplative expression hurting my heart. I thought I’d never see her again, yet here she stands after having saved us from a dire situation.

As if nothing happened.

“There is much to explain. I know I owe you that much.” Her green eyes seek mine, but I cast my gaze to the ground.

“At least,” I grumble.

Maverik chuckles low. In my periphery, Robin’s eyebrow lifts with the hint of a smile on her face while Mariette purses her lips.

“But first, we need to get out of here. We’re too exposed.” The panther shifter looks out at the water, watching the left side as she wrings water from her sleeve. “Were we followed?”

Robin shakes her head with a grin, preening as she flicks invisible dust from her shoulder. “No. But not many can keep up with me.”

“Good. We’ll head there on foot.” Mariette turns to the woods, keeping her back to the water instead of exposing herself to the wolf shifters as she gauges the distance. “But it’s a bit far.”

“Head where?” Greyson crosses his arms.

“To The Wilds.” Mariette’s green eyes meet mine. “To our Rebel base.”

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